

Riku Misora

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Chivalry of a Failed Knight 4

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Riku Misora

Illustration by Won



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IN THAT MOMENT, THE WORST ONE
AND THE TWIN WINGS, THE WORLD'S
STRONGEST SWORD FIGHTER,
BEGAN THEIR CLASH.

"I AM DEMISE, AWAITING AT THE DISTANT
PEAK. I AM SHE WHO RENDS HEAVEN
AND EARTH WITH TWIN BLADES. I AM
EDELWEISS, THE TWIN WINGS. LITTLE BOY,
IT'S TIME YOU LEARNED HOW VAST
THIS WORLD TRULY IS."



REISEN
HIRAGA

UMA
KUROGANE

YUI
TATARA

RINNA
KAZAMATSURI

AMANE
SHINOMIYA

SARA
BLOODLILY

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Chivalry of a Failed Knight

VOL. 4

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Chivalry *of a* *Failed Knight*

VOL. 4

Original Story by Riku Misora

Illustrations by Won



“Listen up, kids! Alcohol is a drink for cool adults, meaning anyone who can drink alcohol is an adult!”

Somewhere in northern Eurasia, under a gray winter sky in a snowy city, a red-haired girl, ten years old with a bottle of liquor in her hand, made an announcement to the congregation she’d gathered in the storage shed behind a church.

“Drink this,” she told them, “and you won’t be children anymore! You’ll join the ranks of cool adults like me. And cool adults never betray their friends! We don’t abandon the weak! This drink is a promise between friends. Are you two man enough to make that promise?!”

“Yes, we are!” the two boys before her, no more than five or six years old, replied loudly as they straightened their backs.

“Good! Then show me just how manly you are!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

The boys held out their small hands, using them to make bowl shapes, and the red-haired girl poured a bit of liquor into them. Bringing their hand-bowls to their lips, the pair resolutely drank the liquor...

“Bleeegh!”

...then vomited it right back up.

“Wh-What is this? So gross!”

“My throat’s on fire...”

“Looks like you’re not ready yet!” the red-haired girl said, laughing cheerfully as she looked down upon the sick boys, their hands on the ground for balance. “You can try again next year. Until then, you’re staying under the protection of Alice and me!”

“Aww...”

“Being a grown-up sucks, huh, Timur?”

“Teehee. The road to being a ‘cool adult’ is quite the long one, I suppose.”

Watching over the two, who wiped their mouths with snow as tears formed in their eyes, from afar was a little girl with darkish ash-blond hair, about the same age as the red-haired girl. She was smiling with an almost motherly expression. Though she seemed

impoverished at a glance, covered in soot and mud, closer inspection revealed chillingly handsome features. That child was Nagi Alisuin, the girl who would one day enter Hagun Academy.

“You’re not ready to be an adult yourself, Yuuri,” Alisuin—or rather, Alice—said to the girl who had just gotten done teasing the two boys. “Timur and Condra are only six years old. You had to know they weren’t going to be able to drink that stuff.”

“It’s fine,” the girl named Yuuri said as a wicked smile crept across her face. “Having them bite off more than they can chew will make them stronger in the end.”

Yuuri and Alice were street children, using the decaying storage shed they were in as the headquarters for the gang of children they led. Though the two were polar opposites in many ways, they did have one thing in common: the ideal of protecting the poor, weak children who couldn’t make it on their own. The daring and heroic Yuuri, the strict father figure, and the sensitive and gentle Alice, the caring mother figure, carried out their self-imposed duties well despite being young, raising the children on their own by providing them with protection and shelter.

The ritual they had performed was a sort of rite of passage for their gang. If a child could drink down all of the liquor that they had put into a green bottle, they would no longer be children under the gang’s protection; they would be adult allies.

They had no parents or other adults to rely on, so even if it meant doing more than they were capable of, the children had to mature and become adults as quickly as they could. With that belief in mind, Yuuri had started the ritual, even though she knew it was wrong for children to drink.

“Hey! Yuuri! Are you still giving those poor babies liquor?!”

“Crap, it’s the Sister! Everyone, scram!”

The sole devout nun who managed the church found them, prompting Yuuri and the two boys to scatter. The boys had great trust in Yuuri, as they dashed off the moment she gave a single order.

“Hold it, you naughty, naughty kids! If you don’t come back here this second, you’ll get no soup tonight!”

“Leader made us drink it!”

“It’s all her fault. We’re not bad kids, honest!”

That trust folded like tissue paper against the promise of warm soup, though.

“G-Guys?! I’m not gonna forget this!”

“Teehee,” Alice chuckled at the two boys as she stood up. The sun was setting; it was almost time for her to start her work.

Suddenly, three girls, about five, six, and seven years old, exited the shed. The oldest of the three, Anastasia, stood before Alice, her

white cheeks as red as little apples.

“H-Hey, Big Sis Alice. H-Here...”

She timidly offered Alice a scarf she’d spent the past few days making, learning from Alice’s dexterity and using the yarn given to her by the nun. Alice assumed she wanted her to look at it, so she took it and looked it over.

“My, the knitting on this is very neat. You must have worked hard on it.”

She complimented Anastasia’s work and tried to return the item, but the girl pressed it into Alice’s chest.

“I-It’s for you, Alice!”

“For me?”

“Yeah,” Anastasia replied, her head bouncing as she nodded. “It’s because you’re always working so hard in the cold.”

“...That so?” Sympathizing with Anastasia’s feelings, Alice wrapped the handmade scarf around her neck. It mysteriously felt much warmer than the scarves she would pick up off the ground. “It’s quite warm. Thank you, Annie.”

“Heheh.”

Anastasia broke into a smile when Alice thanked her, warming not just Alice’s body, but her soul as well.

Frankly, life was difficult for them. Even if they had a storage shed to live in thanks to the nun’s kindness, there was a limit to how well two ten-year-olds could raise two boys and three girls.

Alice did work for the town’s mafia, but after paying her tribute, she was often left with very little. The children subsisted entirely on the nun’s occasional meals of soup and rock-hard bread stored in plastic bags, splitting the food evenly among everyone. It would be wrong to call it anywhere near enough for growing children, as their stomachs were constantly empty, but for Alice, it was a time of happiness.

There was less food for her than there had been when she’d lived alone, and she had to work more than ever to feed the children, but being able to love and be loved by others was so much more fulfilling than when she’d lived alone, hiding and stealing from others. She got to live with her beloved friends; she couldn’t ask for anything more than that. If only all of her tomorrows could be as peaceful as her todays. Yes, if only...



Chapter 1

Training Camp

Late July. The rainy season was over, ushering towering white clouds into the blue sky. A semester of selection battles had passed in the blink of an eye, and summer vacation had begun at Hagun Academy.

With the long vacation, many students returned to their homes, leaving the campus sparsely populated. The only ones who remained were those who wanted to freely enjoy their summer in Tokyo, those who wanted to use the ample facilities on campus to train, and those who couldn't go back home due to family issues.

Strangely, Ikki Kurogane could not be found among those who had stayed behind. His friends and sister were similarly absent. The reason: they had to prepare for the impending Seven Stars Battle Festival, which would begin in mid-August.

No matter what sport one played, it was common for athletes to attend a training camp before a major tournament. Hagun students were no exception, taking part in an annual Seven Stars training camp that consisted of ten days of focused training at a campground in Okutama. Professional Mage-Knights from the King of Knights league were called in to act as instructors for the camp, so there was a vast difference in potential between those who participated and those who did not. Naturally, Ikki and his friends—both the representatives themselves and those they'd chosen to help them with their training—were participating.

The training camp was moved from its usual venue, however, due to the incident with the rock giant. It had been filed as an unsolved mystery, and there were no further reports of the rock giant that had attacked Ikki, but that didn't mean the area was safe. As such, Director Shinguuji had requested and successfully persuaded Kyomon Academy to allow Hagun's students to lodge with them at their training camp in Yamagata Prefecture.



Stella Vermillion, the Crimson Princess, had crossed vast oceans to reach the land of the samurai in hopes of reaching even greater heights. In Yamagata, far from her home away from home in Tokyo,

she had found a difficult fight that would help her do just that.

“Ngh...!”

In a mock battle arena at Kyomon’s training camp, crimson flames and golden lightning clashed fiercely, sending sparks flying. The person controlling those flames as they enveloped her massive sword was Stella, whose peerless strength and overwhelming magical power made her a force to be reckoned with.

One could say that the knight known as Stella Vermillion had no weaknesses to speak of. Her offensive power was remarkably high, leading many to focus too much on it, but Stella was a master of every element of fighting. Offense, defense, and speed; her talent and abilities were virtually unmatched while remaining well-balanced. That was what made her a Rank A knight.

Even so, the opponent she was crossing blades with was holding their own against her ferocious assault. They used graceful parries to abate her rain of blows, but by no means were they forced to stay on defense, as they immediately put their well-honed skills on display by moving directly into a counterattack. There was more than enough power behind Stella’s attacks to batter the average person beyond recognition, so to successfully trade blows with her in such a way meant they were quite skilled.

It came as no surprise to Stella that her foe was so prepared to face her. The knight she was fighting was a volunteer coach from the student council and the greatest student knight in all of Hagun Academy: Touka Toudou, the Raikiri.

“Tch!”

In their swordfight, where every fraction of a second counted, Touka’s skills shined. With each clash of steel, she twisted her wrist to fend off the impact and redirect its force back toward Stella, causing Stella to lurch backward.

“Rgh!”

Stella lurched back to evade the attack, but her sword slipped as a result. Even so, Stella was a first-class knight; the pull of her sword wasn’t enough to endanger her balance. Her well-trained lower body had the tenacity to keep her firmly planted on the ground.

Raikiri had created an opening, though, and she wasn’t about to miss her chance. She quickly returned her Device, Narukami, to the black scabbard attached to her hip, then widened her stance and discharged electricity into the hilt.

“Ah!”

A shudder ran down Stella’s back. She knew what that stance foretold: Touka’s Noble Art and namesake, Raikiri. Her trump card, once unleashed, could cut down any foe in a single stroke. Though she had been defeated once, her strength in close quarters was nonetheless

awe-inspiring. Katharterio Salamandra was vastly superior in terms of power and range, but speed was all that mattered against Raikiri, and even the Crimson Princess fell short in that regard. Stella had no way to fight back, her only option being to fall back the moment Touka took up her stance.

I've been waiting for this too! Stella thought.

Heeding the shudder that ran down her back, she kicked off the ground. All of her attacks had been for the purpose of entering Raikiri's range and coaxing Touka into using it.

Raikiri was a quickdraw that used super-electromagnetism to eject Narukami from its sheath. The explosive propulsion it created couldn't be stopped even by Touka herself; once she drew her sword, she had no choice but to follow through even if she didn't hit her opponent. That was why Stella had intentionally put herself in the line of fire and leaped away once her opponent had prepared to use her trump card.

Despite her plan, however, that trump card was never used. Touka stood stock-still in her quickdraw posture, staring at Stella as she jumped out of range. Stella could only sigh inwardly in admiration of her opponent, whose vision penetrated through her actions.

Figures she wouldn't fall into a trap like that so easily. Forcing her to whiff Raikiri was a plan that anyone could come up with; it was the most logical countermeasure. Touka had likely fought countless foes who had tried the very same thing, so of course she wouldn't be baited into it. *In that case, I'll just have to go with a plan that only I can use!*

Kicking off the ground once more, Stella put over thirty feet between herself and Touka. The distance between them was too great for lances, let alone swords. She had moved to long-range, the domain of bows, guns, and magic.

Stella wasn't a one-trick pony who focused only on close-range combat; long-range was another area where she excelled. In long-range magic battles, the knight with the greater magic capacity had an overwhelming advantage, and Stella had the highest magic capacity of all registered knights.

Touka had long-range attacks as well, but she knew she would be overpowered by Stella's sheer firepower if she were drawn into a battle reliant solely on magic. She rushed to clear the gap between them, but it was already too late.

"Haaah!"

Continuing to increase the distance between them, Stella focused even more magic into the Dragon Breath that enveloped her Device, Lævateinn. The flames devoured her magic, burning hotter and brighter than before. "Devour, Dragon Fang!"



Pointing the tip of her fiery sword at Touka, who continued to dash straight at her, Stella attacked. The fire gushing from Lævateinn's tip quickly took on the form of a living creature—the form of a flaming dragon, with the long, slender body of a snake.

Opening its toothy jaws wide, it descended upon Touka. She narrowly evaded its deadly bite with a sidestep, but it wasted no time in twisting to the side, once again baring its fangs at her.

More than just a bombardment of flames, Dragon Fang was a guided missile that melted anything it touched as it endlessly pursued its prey. It was impossible for Touka to shake the dragon off; it would chase her until it could finally chomp down.

The whole of Stella's staggering magic capacity was being channeled into her Noble Art; a half-baked attack would have no effect in the face of such incredible power. Thus, Touka responded to the approaching fire dragon with the only option available to her: her strongest, fastest attack.

“Raikiri!”

The plasma blade decapitated the dragon. As it did, Stella kicked off the ground with all her strength, like a burst of wind headed toward Touka.

Got her!

Caught in Stella's trap, she had been forced to use Raikiri, and as a result, she had been forced to follow through with a full-power swing of her sword—in other words, she was completely defenseless. If Stella was going to settle the battle, there was no better time.

Not even giving Touka time to breathe, Stella used her explosive power to close the gap in an instant, swinging her sword for the match-deciding blow. Having just used her ultimate ability, Touka wouldn't be able to react to the direct, vertical slash in time. At least, she *shouldn't* have been able to.

“Huh...?”

Stella's attack should've been a guaranteed hit, but in that fraction of a second, Touka moved in a way that Stella never expected. She had definitely followed through with Raikiri, but she didn't stop as if she had.

She used the momentum from Raikiri to spin and attack again?!

The explosive propulsion from her super-electromagnetic skill allowed her to strike a second time after a high-speed spin. She had seen through Stella's scheme, boldly using Raikiri to bait Stella into thinking she was defenseless and jumping in to attack, and Stella had fallen for it hook, line, and sinker.

“Agh!”

Though she was the one who had leaped in to deal the finishing blow, it was Stella's own stomach that suffered a blow from Raikiri.

The strike from Touka's Phantom Form weapon didn't physically wound Stella, but it did sap away her stamina, making her fall to her knees. The moment she did, Narukami was pressed against her neck and the battle came to an end.

"Nobody ever told me you could use a feint like that," Stella lauded.

"That's because this was my first time ever doing it," Touka replied. "Searching for your opponent's weaknesses is a good foundation in itself, but at the top of the nation, opponents will also know their own weaknesses and use them to ensnare you. That includes the Seven Stars King, Moroboshi, too. If you want to win against people like us, it's important to manipulate our way of thinking. You've got a long way to go, Stella."

Once Touka had explained to her redheaded underclassman why she had won, she offered a relaxed smile. That, however, merely frustrated Stella all the more, and she groaned in shame.



"Did the Crimson Princess seriously lose?"

"What a joke."

Two girls from Bunkyoku Academy, each wearing the yellow armband signifying their roles as members of their school's newspaper club, sighed. They had come to the camp and watched Stella and Touka's fight from afar in search of a scoop; the Seven Stars training camp was a rare chance to get information on students from other schools. It was an important event for journalists from all of the schools, and the girls had traveled all the way from Kyushu to write articles about Stella Vermillion, the legendary princess knight.

"Pretty lame, right?"

"It would've been way more exciting if we could've gone with the title, *Princess Bests Raikiri!*"

"Yet here she is, too weak to win! So much for our article."

They had wanted to write an article that took advantage of Stella's notoriety, but a front-page story about her losing would leave a lot to be desired. The club members were sorely disappointed to be so let down.

"Wow, Bunkyoku. Why are they zeroing in so much on who won?"

Hearing their grumbles from nearby, another girl with a yellow armband was astonished.

"Honestly. How can they call themselves journalists if they're so blinded by the result they want that they can't see the truth that's right in front of them?"

Offering her agreement was Nagi Alisuin, who had been

watching the mock battle alongside Kagami Kusakabe of Hagun's newspaper club. The two of them had seen Stella fight in the past, so they knew the battle hadn't ended as such due to Stella being weak.

There were others who could see the same thing as well, despite not being from the same school. A boy and a girl had also been watching the fight together, somewhat far away from Kagami and Alice.

"Woow! That was an awesome fight! They should've charged for that!"

"Hagun's bringing the cream of the crop this year, eh, Kusakabe?"

"Hey, Yagokoro, Komiyama," Kagami responded with a smile as the pair approached them. "Were you spectating too?"

"Of course we were! Even if it's just a mock battle, no journalist worth their salt would miss a fight between Raikiri and the Crimson Princess."

"Absolutely."

While Kagami greeted the pair, Alice tapped her shoulder from behind. She signaled a "What's up?", urging Alice to say what was on her mind.

"Who might these fine people be, Kagamin?"

It was then that Kagami remembered that Alice had never met these two.

"Oh, right, you haven't been introduced," Kagami said, finally realizing that Alice had never met the people she was talking to. "The lady here is Yagokoro from Bukyoku Academy's newspaper club, and the guy is Komiyama from Donrou's."

"Nice to meet you, Alisuin."

"Good to meetcha."

"I see. So, you all share the same occupation?"

"Yep. We've got the same armbands, see?"

Alice finished their exchange of greetings by nodding in assent. As soon as she did, Yagokoro approached her, gawking.

"Man, I've heard rumors, but you really are one heck of a lady-killer. I bet you could get rich with a face like that."

"Don't be rude, Yagokoro," Komiyama admonished as he nudged her in the ribs.

"Ahaha, don't worry." Alice smiled, seemingly unperturbed.

"Much like flowers, women are meant to be admired."

"W-Women...?"

Komiyama seemed put off when he heard that word come from Alice's mouth. He didn't understand what she'd meant by it.

"Oh, that's just who Alice is. Nothing to feel weird about, Komiyama."

“I-If you say so.”

“Seriously, Komiyam? You didn’t know about her? Someone didn’t do their research.”

“Rgh. I don’t research people’s sexual orientations ahead of time.”

How in-character for him, Kagami thought to herself.

Journalists oriented themselves in certain ways too. Yagokoro and Kagami would write articles that included information about the subjects’ personalities and the like. Komiyama, on the other hand, gave direct, unembellished facts—the kind of reporting found in national broadcasts. For a journalist like him, there was little reason to research his subject’s sexual orientation.

“But Nagi, you’re a representative too, right? Are you sure you can hang out up here and not fall behind the others?”

“I just happened to make it thanks to the luck of the draw. As much as I’d hate to say it to the people I defeated, I’m really not all that interested in the Seven Stars; the only reason I’m even here is to keep my roommate company, so yes, I’m content with just hanging out.”

“‘Luck of the draw’? Sounds fishy. I can’t imagine ‘luck of the draw’ is how you won twenty consecutive battles.”

“Well, one way or the other, I won. There’s not much I can do about it now.”

“Everyone sees things differently, I guess. If that’s how you feel, then fine by me.”

“Ooh, I love open-minded men.”

“G-Gimme a break...”

Komiyama backed away, turning pale under the weight of Alice’s flirtatious gaze. Kagami stifled her laughter as she watched the two, then suddenly remembered something she wanted to ask the other journalists.

“By the way, you two, what did you think of the match?”

“You mean Raikiri and the Crimson Princess’ duel?”

“Yeah.”

“Huh? Let’s see... They were crazy strong.”

“Who was?”

“Both of them.”

Kagami grinned at that response. It meant the two of them understood. Yagokoro and Komiyama had correctly perceived the true reason that Stella lost her mock battle.

“Just like the rumors say, the Crimson Princess is ridiculously powerful. The power behind every blow, her instantaneous force... Incredible, top-class knights like her only come around once a decade. The Crimson Princess isn’t weak, Raikiri is just unimaginably strong.

That's the only reason she lost."

"I was thinking the same thing. Komiyama and I are third-years, so we have information on Raikiri from last year, but she's so much more powerful and skilled than last time. There's no comparison."

"She must have been honing her skills to finally defeat the Seven Stars King this year," Komiyama added, "which makes it all the more unbelievable that she's not a representative. Raikiri's gotten so strong, but she's only at this training camp as a volunteer coach, and even though she just proved she's good enough to take down a Rank A knight, the one who took her place was a Rank F, of all people. That just adds insult to injury."

Komiyama turned his attention to the edge of the training ground. There stood the man who had stolen Raikiri's seat as a representative: the Worst One, Ikki Kurogane. Despite his status as a Rank F, the weakest of all knights, he had mowed down top-ranking knights one after another until he'd climbed all the way up to claim his seat as a Seven Stars representative.

"Speaking of, what's he doing in the corner over there?"

"A mock battle, maybe? He's holding Intetsu."

"He's with the Hagure sisters, two of Hagun's other representatives."

"Is he really having a two-on-one mock battle?"

"It's Kurogane we're talking about here. I wouldn't be surprised in the least."

Kagami's assumption was correct. As the four watched, Ikki was in the midst of a mock battle with the twins Kikyuu and Botan Hagure, per their request.

"I've got you noooow!"

With her lance Device in hand, Kikyuu Hagure used her instant-acceleration Noble Art to charge at Ikki, approaching sonic speed. Ikki didn't seem at all hurried despite her absurd speed, though. He let out a "Whoops" as he stomped on the head of her spear just before it reached him, stabbing it into the ground.

"Whooooa?!"

Kikyuu, attached to the other end of the lance, launched into the air like a pole vaulter, guided by her momentum. She flew clear over Ikki and crashed straight into her sister Botan, who was in the midst of pulling the triggers of her two guns, aimed at Ikki's back.

"Hngh!"

"Aaah?!"

"Are you okay?" Ikki asked the twins, worried after they'd rolled together across the sand.

"Oww... Yeah, I'm fine. You okay, Botan?"

"Ugh... I'm a little scraped up."

“Shizuku!”

“Of course. Leave it to me, Big Brother.”

On Ikki’s command, Shizuku, who had been waiting in the wings, used her healing magic to mend the cuts on Botan’s knees. While she was doing so, Ikki addressed the Hagure sisters.

“Kikyuu,” he said, “your speed is a great asset, but as a lancer, you can’t just charge at foes who have shorter reach than you. That’s essentially throwing away your advantage. I think you’d be better off adding a bit of patience to your battle plan. Also, if you’re going to fight together with your sister, you shouldn’t stand in her line of fire.”

Watching from afar as Ikki indicated the major problems in their strategy, Alice voiced her thoughts about the fight.

“Rather than a mock battle, it looks to me like Ikki’s just training the two.”

It was too one-sided to have been a mock battle. The Hagure sisters had asked Ikki to fight a mock battle in order to train them, however, so Alice’s view was more or less correct.

“‘Training’, huh? Still, he overwhelmed them. Worst One over there didn’t even have to swing his sword.”

“Kagami, are those two weak?”

“Definitely not,” Kagami replied, shaking her head in response to Yagokoro’s question. “A lot of people say they just got lucky to not have to fight people like Ikki or Stella, but they’re not weak. Both of them defeated knights from among the top ten in Hagun and have undefeated twenty-win streaks to their names. They’re probably not as strong as Raikiri or Runner’s High, but don’t go thinking they’re anything but tough.”

“Guess I’ve been treating them like children, huh? They’re a bigger deal than I imagined.”

“They’re definitely taking advantage of this training camp, though, training under him.”

“Kurogane just loves being overly helpful, doesn’t he?” Kagami asked. “Maybe it’s a nice mental break for him.”

“Well, he *did* beat all of Kyomon’s coaches within three days of coming here.” Alice spoke the truth. It was only the fourth day of their training camp, but Ikki had already beaten all of Kyomon’s professional Mage-Knight coaches in mock battles, leaving him nobody to fight with. Even Raikiri, the knight who was likely the most powerful coach at the camp, had fallen in a real battle against him. “And of course, Kyomon has already called in a special emergency coach to deal with him. Guess they weren’t too happy to be shown up by the Worst One.”

“Who do you think’ll come? I bet Director Shinguuji or Ms. Saikyou would have been willing to rush over here, but I heard they

headed to Osaka to prepare for the Seven Stars and the KoK. Then again, all of the coaches here are ranked in the National League, so there's no point in calling any normal Mage-Knight."

"If they don't call someone powerful like that, there's a chance they won't be able to keep up with the students."

"Hagun's so strong this year! Looks like those of us at Bukyoku had better watch our backs."

Yagokoro praised Hagun's representatives with a sigh.

"Oh, don't give me that," Kagami replied with a sarcastic grin.

"We know good and well that you're here to keep up your win streak. Besides, you've got someone who's pretty tough even by Bukyoku standards this year, right?"

Bukyoku was a prestigious school among prestigious schools, having been hogging the top spot at the Seven Stars for the past several years. The school's representatives were all incredible knights, and the reigning Seven Stars King, Yuudai Moroboshi, was so strong that his name was known around the world.

However, just before the tournament's entry deadline, a certain man scoffed at the famed hero and became a representative himself. That man, the Gale Sword Emperor, was the only Rank A student born in Japan: Ouma Kurogane.

"For some reason, a third-year Rank A student who didn't care about official battles in his first two years is showing his face now," Kagami continued. "I was really surprised when I saw Bukyoku's lineup."

"Me too," Komiyama said. "I didn't think he would try to enter at this point. Maybe him going to the Seven Stars means Bukyoku's putting everything they've got into this year's Festival."

Excluding the Crimson Princess, the Rank A from abroad, and the Worst One, the man who had defeated Raikiri with a single slash, there was an abnormally high number of nameless first-year representatives for the Seven Stars, all of them spread throughout the participating schools. The tournament hadn't even begun, yet it was already progressing unnaturally.

Amidst the uncertainty that came with that unnatural progression, leaving Ouma Kurogane, a knight ranked higher than Moroboshi, idle would have been a senseless decision for Bukyoku to make. Komiyama and Kagami wondered if that was the reason behind his entry, but Yagokoro shot that theory down with a shake of her head.

"Nope. The Gale Sword Emperor isn't the kind of guy to listen to what the school wants. Heck, he usually doesn't go to school at all, or even let them know he's still alive. He entered the Festival of his own accord; it surprised us just the same."

"So the school didn't order him to join?"

"Right."

"I see. If it was his decision, I doubt the school would have any reason to refuse him."

"Well, he challenged Shibata, Bukyoku's sixth representative, to a duel with the Seven Stars rep spot on the line."

"So Ouma won, then."

"Honestly, it wasn't much of a fight. He was way out of Shibata's league."

There was a look of pity on Yagokoro's face as she explained it. Shibata must have been badly beaten.

"It's a shame about Shibata, but isn't the Gale Sword Emperor's random whim actually good news for journalists like us?"

"Definitely. High-profile guys like him give us more exposure in the papers."

"Everyone on the internet is expecting a fight between the Crimson Princess and the Gale Sword Emperor."

"No surprise there. They're all waiting for the first battle between Rank A knights since World Clock versus Demon Princess."

Their battle was revered as legendary. Coincidentally, that battle was another Hagun versus Bukyoku fight, serving as a battle for supremacy between east and west.

"Sucks for us in Donrou, since we're in Tokyo too."

"But ever since my exposé on his fight with the Worst One, I hear the Sword Eater's really been giving it his all."

"That's the only silver lining, really. We're expecting great things from him this year. There are some problems with how the guy acts, but the Sword Eater's got a mind for battle that's second to none. Then again, even taking that into account, Worst One is really the person everybody's got their eyes on this year."

Komiyama expected great things from his classmate, the Sword Eater, but his journalist's intuition was telling him that the real dark horse of the Seven Stars was Ikki.

"There's been hushed speculation ever since his match with the Crimson Princess," he continued, "but now that he's defeated Raikiri and started to stand out on the national stage, everyone's secretly wondering just how far this nameless Rank F can go against the strongest students in the nation. This is off the record, by the way, but all the networks are working to gather as much info as they can on him before the start of the Festival."

"He's the Gale Sword Emperor's little brother, not to mention the man who defeated the Crimson Princess and took down the Raikiri in a single blow. How else would they treat him, right?"

Yagokoro's agreement made Kagami smirk inwardly. It was very

satisfying for her to see that the knight she had been following for so long was finally getting recognition from everyone, proving that she really did have an eye for talent. What made her all the happier was that everyone had come to know what trials the knight known as Ikki Kurogane had gone through to get to where he was.

Not that it was a great idea to get so invested in one guy, she thought, but what girl wouldn't want to support such an earnest, trustworthy man?

She figured that since it was Ikki, she couldn't help but to do so. It wasn't her fault, she decided.

"Hmm?" Suddenly, when Kagami tried to look back toward Ikki, she noticed someone else in her periphery. Like her and the other journalists, an ash-blond girl was watching Ikki from afar. "Is that the Icy Sneer from Kyomon?"

"Sure is. Maybe she's here to scout the Worst One."

"Let's go."

"We've definitely gotta get her comments on— Wait, Komiyama, you're already going?!"

"Hang on, Komiyama! You can't have her all to yourself! Oh, Nagi, I'll come back for your interview later. Bye!"

Yagokoro and Komiyama ran after the knight, careful not to burn bridges with Alice all the while. Kagami, however, remained, because she had Alice with her. It would have been rude to leave her by herself, so Kagami started by asking for permission.

"Alice! I wanna go with them. You mind waiting here?"

"..."

Alice's response didn't come immediately. Her head was drooped down, her face looking as though she was lost in thought.

"...Alice?"

"Oh, uh, sorry, Kagamin. I was just daydreaming a bit. What's the matter?"

Once Kagami finally received an answer, she explained that she wanted to go interview Icy Sneer.

"Go ahead," Alice told her. "I'll wait here for you."

"Okay. See you soon!"

Kagami ran after the two other journalists, but on the way, her thoughts turned to Alice once more.

What in the world was she daydreaming about? Is she getting nervous about the Seven Stars too? In all the months they'd known each other, Alice had never just ignored someone talking to her. What's more, she had been silent throughout the whole previous conversation. Was there something about Ouma Kurogane that bothered her? Well, I guess everyone daydreams sometimes.

While thinking such things, Kagami met up with Icy Sneer, so she

quickly shoved the thoughts out of her mind. She happened to arrive just after Komiyama had begun his own interview.

“Hello there. I’m Komiyama of Donrou Academy News. Mikoto Tsuruya, what do you think of the Worst One—or rather, Another One, Ikki Kurogane? Do you think he’ll be able to compete with students in the top eight like yourself?”

“Hrm. You journalists certainly are impatient, aren’t you?” A very sudden interview, but someone as strong as Tsuruya was sure to be used to sudden attacks from the media; she wasn’t taken aback by the abrupt questioning. On the contrary, the calmness in her face was betrayed by a knowing grin. “So, what thoughts came to mind while I watched him? There’s little point in communicating that with words; for knights, results in battle are the only facts we need. The stage has already been set for battle. Whether he can compete with us or not will be made abundantly clear in due time. The truth will be made evident in the most merciless way.”

As she made that declaration, her lips curled into a smirk. The coldness emanating from her sent a chill down the backs of the three journalists who accosted her.

“Haha. Well, I’ll be taking my leave,” Tsuruya said, leaving the three frozen journalists in her wake as she headed toward the exit of the training field. She hadn’t given them a concrete answer, but she was so elegant and composed as she departed that her complete lack of doubt in her own strength was made crystal clear.

“Guess that’s the kind of dignity you’d expect from the top eight, right?”

“So much gravitas. It kinda scared me.”

Yagokoro and Komiyama were starstruck. Kagami felt similarly, but of the three, she was the one who had the most faith in Ikki. After all, he had already taken down the Sword Eater, a quarterfinalist, and Raikiri, a semifinalist.

You can’t keep feigning invincibility forever, she thought.

Of course, Tsuruya hadn’t made it to the quarterfinals of the previous year’s Seven Stars by being as naïve as Kagami thought she was.

“Hey, Miko.” One of Kyomon’s other representatives called out to Tsuruya at the exit of the training field. “What do you make of Hagun this year? Think you can beat ’em easily?”

“No way,” she proclaimed, flashing her trademark icy sneer. “Didn’t you see him crush three professional knights like it was nothing? That’s downright insane.”

Mikoto Tsuruya was much stronger than Kagami and the others had imagined, and that strength was precisely what made her so apt at judging the strength of others. The Icy Sneer herself perceived more

acutely than any of the three that she couldn't defeat the Worst One.

Groaning, Tsuruya leaned her back against a wall. As she did, she heard an uproar coming from the training field she had just left.

"Hey, isn't that Torajirou Nangou?!"

"They called in *the* God of War to coach the Worst One?! How extravagant can you get?!"

"That's downright insane..." Still leaning against the wall, Tsuruya slid down until she was sitting. There was only one thing she could wish for now. "Ugh, just don't let me be up against that monster in the first round!"

The man who was once mocked as the Worst One had become known across the nation as an unorthodox genius. The Seven Stars King, Yuudai Moroboshi; the Rank A Crimson Princess, Stella Vermillion; the Rank A Gale Sword Emperor, Ouma Kurogane. Ikki Kurogane stood among them as a fellow favorite to win the Seven Stars Battle Festival.

How long could he continue to cut down such powerful opponents? Just how long could the uncrowned Rank F upset match after match? Knights and spectators alike watched each battle with bated breath, awaiting the unconventional sword master's results.



Kyomon's training camp had nothing akin to a schedule. The coaches invited to the camp would give special lessons and the like, and each representative could decide for themselves whether they wanted to attend or not.

There existed as many Blazer abilities as there did Blazers. Among the countless distinct classifications, each one had its own optimal training method, so attempting a one-size-fits-all curriculum was likely to have a negative effect on everyone's training. As such, the students were allowed to set their own schedules, either alone or with their friends.

Making use of that freedom, Stella invited Ikki on an evening jog to a downtown area six miles away from the camp. Even the twelve-mile round trip was too short a distance to be called "training" for the pair, however; it was more of a diversion than anything else. Stella just wanted to run and run, to distract herself from her loss at the hands of Raikiri.

"Ughhh! Argh! I can't take iiit!"

In a park in the downtown area where they'd planned to turn around, Stella stomped her feet like a child as she sat, resting on a bench together with Ikki.

"Not even running helped make you feel better?"

"No! Not even a little bit!" Though she had run at twice her usual

pace, and though she had washed her face at the park, the clouds in Stella's mind hadn't cleared in the slightest. Back during the incident in Okutama, and when she saw Ikki's fight, she had a feeling that Touka was stronger than her but having that fact thrust into her face in such a palpable form made her so mad that she didn't know what to do with herself. "When I fought her, I realized that she really is incredibly strong."

"Toudou's close-range fighting is pretty much impenetrable. It's basically impossible to defeat her with normal tactics."

"But you beat her, Ikki."

"Well, I'm nothing *but* close-range. If I lose there, what do I have left?"

Seeing her boyfriend's modest smile made her a little envious. Though she hadn't a leg to stand on against Raikiri, that man, with his warm smile, had defeated her in the fairest fight imaginable.

Touka and Ikki's one-second clash was still burned into Stella's mind. She was proud of Ikki, but ashamed all the same, because he was at a place that she was yet unable to reach.

"And to think, she was only fourth place last year. Japan is definitely at a high level."

"Well, it's a tournament, so the matchups come down to luck. Toudou placed fourth, but that doesn't mean she's fourth-strongest. Didn't she forfeit the match for third place because one of her relatives had a medical emergency?"

"That doesn't mean it's okay for me to lose to her. My main objective is to become the new Seven Stars King by beating you and everyone else, and since at least you and the current Seven Stars King have beaten her, I have to beat her too. And... there's one other representative I'm nervous about."

"Who's that?"

"He's from the same school as the Seven Stars King. It's Ouma Kurogane."

"Ah...!"

The moment Stella said that name, Ikki's face visibly stiffened, confirming her doubts.

"Looks like I was right. You guys *are* related."

"...Yeah. He's my brother, a year older than me."

"I had no idea you had a brother, Ikki. Actually, this is also my first time hearing that there's a Rank A in Japan's school system besides me."

"Well, in the two years since he entered high school—no, actually, in the five years since middle school, he's been missing."

"Huh? Did he just completely disappear?"

"Not quite. It was rare, but he would contact us from time to

time, and he showed up in public sometimes. He'd go missing again a day or two later, though, and he hasn't had a single official battle in all this time. When we were kids, he was the champion of our elementary school league, so people really had their eyes on him. Still, no matter how talented you are, the world tends to lose interest when you go into hiding for five years. Shizuku is probably a way more noteworthy knight by now, so it's not surprising that you don't know about him, Stella."

"I see. Yeah, I guess if you avoid official battles for five whole years... Wonder why he's suddenly so interested in Seven Stars. Any idea, Ikki?"

"Nope," he replied, shaking his head. "I'm completely in the dark."

"Even though he's your own brother?"

"I wasn't the only misfit in the family," Ikki chuckled, a smirk on his face. "Ouma was one too, so there's almost no relationship between us. Honestly, he's even more distant to me than my father, so I really don't have any idea. But, well, if I had to speak based on my own impressions, he seems like a very stoic person."

"What do you mean?"

"He's the kind of guy who lives to become stronger."

"...Are you sure that's not you, Ikki?"

"He's nothing like me," Ikki said, shaking his head again. "Ouma is totally uninterested in anything besides getting stronger. He didn't care about me or Shizuku, all because we were weaker than him. Same went for our father. At some point, he said in an interview that the reason he doesn't do official fights like the Seven Stars is that nobody is worthy of being his opponent."

"Pretty confident in himself, isn't he?"

"He has the strength to back that up, though. If someone like him, who's only interested in getting stronger, is entering the Seven Stars, it must be for the sake of getting stronger. And... This is just a guess, but I think he's after you, Stella. You're both Rank A knights; it would normally take at least a trip around the world to find someone like you. I can only imagine he wants to fight you."

Stella couldn't help but agree with Ikki's explanation. It would have been a lie to say that she wasn't interested in fighting someone like Ouma, who was as talented as she was. If given the opportunity, she would accept a challenge from him, and he most likely felt the same way.

"By the way, Ikki, how strong would you say Ouma is?"

"As strong as he claimed he is."

"How strong is that again?"

"When he said nobody is worthy of being his opponent, he really

wasn't exaggerating."

Ikki's reply, somewhat strained with nervousness at the thought of his brother's participation, sent a chill down Stella's back. From Ouma Kurogane's point of view, people like Raikiri and even the Seven Stars King were mere fleas compared to him. For Ikki to agree with a statement like that meant that Ouma was far from normal, and if someone that powerful was going to participate, it only furthered Stella's need to win against Raikiri.

"That settles it!" she yelled, setting a new goal for herself. "I swear, I *will* become stronger than Touka by the end of this training camp!"

There were five days left. If Stella challenged her to a mock battle every day, then counting the one from earlier in the day, they would fight a total of six battles. She had to win more of them than she lost.

With her new goal clear in her mind, it was in Stella's nature to feel an itch within herself. She didn't want to sit around in a park any longer, so she hopped off the bench and rushed Ikki to do the same.

"Ikki! Let's get back to the campground! After I get some food in me, I'm ready to keep traini—"

Grrrrr.

An adorable little growling noise came from Stella's stomach, interrupting her. Since it wasn't the time of day for children to be at play, the park was just about empty, making it sound even louder.

"Haha. That was a cute noise," Ikki laughed, causing Stella's cheeks to turn redder than apples.

"Hnnngh! I-I can't help it! I've been exercising all day! It's almost time to eat, too!"

"Yeah, you're right. The fact that your stomach is empty is just proof of how hard you're working. It's nothing to be embarrassed about."

"U-Uh, right. I'm glad you understand."

"But it's not a good idea to push yourself with an empty stomach. Let's go have a nice meal first."

"Ah."

As he stood up, Ikki took the blushing Stella's hand. The sudden gesture surprised her, but Ikki seemed not to have taken notice.

"I'm sure there'll be something in the shopping district. C'mon," he said, and started walking with a smile on his face and Stella's hand in his.



It was evening, so the shopping district was crowded with students on vacation and couples out to get dinner. Among it all, Ikki

and Stella walked together, holding hands. As they did, however, they could hear murmurs about them.

“Isn’t that Princess Vermillion and the Kurogane kid from the news?”

“Sure is. They say he tricked her into sleeping with him, right?”

“I heard they made all that up.”

After their relationship was exposed to the world, Ikki’s face—alongside Stella’s—became known worldwide. That the two were in love was also made known, which meant that no matter how they felt about it, they stood out whenever they walked together.

“Look, they’re holding hands! They really *are* dating!”

“Whoa, the princess is even more ridiculously gorgeous in person.”

“Man, I wish I could bag a girl like that.”

“Hnnngh!”

Their curious gazes dug into Stella, causing her ears to turn a shade redder. She and Ikki had gotten used to being treated as a couple in school, but Stella still found it embarrassing to be seen like that by everyone outside of school as well.

Noticing this, Ikki asked,

“Hey, Stella? If you’re embarrassed, do you want to stop holding hands?” Ikki asked, noticing how she felt. It was the least he could do to help after realizing that she was red from how fixated she was on the fact that other people were looking at them.

“I-I’m not... embarrassed,” she lied in response. Despite her embarrassment, she loved holding hands with him.

“That’s good. Don’t push yourself, though.”

Ikki understood her inner workings well enough, but rather than prying, he offered her a smile and a tightened grip on her hand as he continued to walk, pulling her along once again.

Ikki’s changed, hasn’t he? Stella thought as she looked at his profile.

The Ikki Kurogane she once knew had never been so forward about their relationship. Like her, it was his first time falling in love or even dating, so with each and every step they took as boyfriend and girlfriend, they would both be strangely surprised by whatever they did.

Recently, though, something about him had changed. He was strangely assertive, like when he had taken Stella’s hand in the park. Holding hands was one of their favorite shows of affection, and they had often found themselves naturally, gently coming together often, but that was no longer the case.

It’s like he’s clenching it, or squeezing...

Instead of meeting naturally, Ikki was actively seeking out her

hand to hold it. Even in the middle of the busy shopping district, he was holding her hand without a single sign of worrying over the glances from all directions. Discretion and sincerity were two of Ikki's virtues; such a change in him not only surprised Stella, it occasionally made her feel apprehensive as well. Curious about what had caused his mental state to change, Stella decided to ask him point-blank about it.

"Hey, Ikki? You seem a little different."

"Me? Different?"

"You're more, um... assertive? Or maybe more dignified than before."

Or maybe cooler and more manly...

For a moment, Ikki looked surprised by her question. He then scratched his cheek, seemingly a little embarrassed.

"Guess you would notice, huh, Stella?" His reply revealed that he had some knowledge of the change himself. "Sorry. I suppose I'm being a little greedy."

"I-It doesn't bother me or anything! I was just wondering why, is all."

"Well, it's not really anything worth mentioning," Ikki prefaced his explanation before delving deeper. "It's just, ever since I proposed, I've found myself becoming so much more attached to you. It even surprised me. I just can't help how much I want to make it clear that you're the woman I love. It just makes me want to hug you so badly. I realize that's probably unethical, though."

Though slightly ashamed of his inner feelings, Ikki told Stella why he'd changed, as she wished. The proposal after his fight with Raikiri served as a major turning point for him. To that point, he was certain that he loved Stella more than anyone else could.

With their intense love and mutual feelings for each other confirmed with the proposal, Ikki's desire to monopolize Stella, to never let anyone else lay their hands on her grew far stronger. As a result, something budded within him: the acute awareness of his duty to protect his woman. That new awareness had made Ikki more assertive than ever before.

Ikki... You're so cute, Ikki.

Stella felt her heart beat harder and faster at his confession, with each thumping beat bringing forth a ticklish adoration from deep within her heart. Her boyfriend had staked his claim, albeit indirectly, by stating, "You're mine. I won't let anyone else have you."

Simultaneously, he projected an air of coercion to the people around them, silently telling them, "This is my woman. Stay away from her."

Stella hung her head to hide the grin that was threatening to force itself out. She couldn't handle how adorable it was that, despite

his inexperience, Ikki was trying to hog her for himself. She had no doubt that he would be loath to be found “adorable” for doing so, but to her, his actions were almost dizzyingly cute. As a woman—as his woman—Stella wanted to reward him, so she took the arm that held her hand and embraced it with her entire upper body.

“S-Stella?”

“Maybe if I do this, they’ll finally get that I’m yours, Ikki.”



Stella smiled and pressed her cheek against his arm. The stares of passersby had stopped bothering her; the desire to reward the boy who wanted to keep her all to himself was much greater than any such triviality.

For Ikki, however, just holding hands while they walked together made keeping a straight face almost impossible. With Stella having taken things a step further by clinging to him, it became painfully obvious that his mind was in a frenzy. Even so, he was the one who had wanted to stake his claim, meaning that it was hardly his right to ask her to let go.

“R-Right. Good idea. Yeah...”

Though Ikki was doing his best to remain calm and continue walking, his cheeks were red with embarrassment and sweat had started to slick the hand that held Stella’s.

Heehee. I’m so happy.

Ikki’s show of bravado was just too cute for Stella to handle, so she relaxed her legs and let herself be dragged along. Anyone who saw them would probably be grossed out by how lovey-dovey they were being, but Stella didn’t care. They were in love, after all.

Make me all yours, my prince. She whispered those words—words she’d be too ashamed to ever say aloud—deep in her heart. As she did, however, Ikki suddenly stopped walking.

“Hm?”

Stella thought that it might have been because he’d found a place for them to chow down, but quickly realized that was not the case. Ikki’s face, turned to look behind the two of them, had become disturbingly pale.



“What’s wrong?”

“Do you see that guy in the coveralls who just went by?” Ikki asked, staring at a man who had just walked in front of them. “Don’t you think he’s walking funny?”

“Maybe he’s got an injury?”

“No...”

Ikki had thought the same thing at first, but quickly inhaled and sharpened his focus.

Probably not.

Based on the man’s stature and the width of his shoulders, his skeletal structure could be grasped. From there, Ikki could estimate how the man’s muscles were attached and how they would move his limbs, comparing the result to the way he was walking.

According to Ikki’s analysis, the man’s walking pattern was unnatural. Steps with his right foot were subtly different than steps

with his left, but it didn't seem to be due to injury or trauma. Each joint appeared to be working normally as they pushed him forward, but something alien, something that didn't exist naturally as part of the human body, was disrupting his stride.

Judging by the wrinkles in his pants and the way he's walking, there's something in his right pocket.

The man had his hand shoved into his right pants pocket, but the way his pants creased made it clear that his hand wasn't the only thing in there. He was holding something, hiding it. It was long and somewhat broad, in the shape of, perhaps... a survival knife.

He must be an electrician, based on his clothes.

It was normal for electricians to carry knives so they could peel the insulation off of thick wires. Ikki had a feeling that the man's knife was a little big for that kind of work, but that could easily be explained by his own lack of knowledge or the man's personal tastes. When they passed by each other, however, Ikki caught sight of a glimmer from under the brim of the man's cap. It had come from his bloodshot eyes, like those of a beast hunting its prey.

There were plenty of people who couldn't help but look unpleasant, and the man's eyes could have been bloodshot from lack of sleep. Similarly, the object in his pocket could have been a tool for his job. Those were probably far more likely than the worst-case scenario that Ikki was imagining, and yet his heart wouldn't stop pounding at the thought of that worst-case scenario.

"...All right."

"Huh? Ikki? Where are you going?!"

"Wait here for a sec."

He freed his right arm from Stella's grasp and ran alone toward the electrician. His only goal was to confirm what was in the man's pocket; if what worried him was his own rude assumption, he would simply apologize. If the man didn't forgive him despite his apology, it was nothing more than an inconvenience if it meant refuting the scenario pervading his mind. That was what Ikki thought as he called out to the man in the coveralls.

When he was called out to, the man stopped walking. He had stopped in the very center of an intersection in the shopping district, the place where the largest number of people would be walking. Why would he stop somewhere like that?

"Tch! Hey, the heck?! Why are you standing around in the middle of the road, old man?!"

The answer to Ikki's question became all too clear the moment the man ran into some middle school-aged kids.

"Hreeek!"

The man made a bizarre noise, perhaps a groan or a scream, and

immediately moved to pull the item from his right pocket. The object the man had kept hidden there would finally be revealed.

Ikki watched closely with his honed concentration and kinetic vision, seeming to almost stop the flow of time itself, as the man acted. The moment the object peeked out from his pocket and began reflecting the lights of the shopping district, Ikki confirmed that it was, as he had feared, a thick survival knife. Given that they were in the middle of an intersection, there was only one reason to draw a knife: the worst-case scenario that Ikki had hypothesized was becoming a reality.

Once his biggest fear had been confirmed, Ikki leaped into action. He kicked off the ground and slipped into the crowd that was still slowed by his concentration, running to capture the man with the knife standing twenty or so feet away from him.

I can make it!

The gaggle of middle schoolers in front of the man still hadn't noticed what he was doing, but only about half of the blade was out of his pocket. With Ikki's speed, he had plenty of time to get there. As long as he kept running, he could strike the man in the back and knock him unconscious, ending things before the man could even finish drawing the knife. It came with the risk of causing an uproar afterward, but Ikki's quick thinking and trust in the gut feeling he got from the split second when he and the man passed by each other would at least prevent any sort of tragedy.

Although what was happening was, to Ikki, the worst-case scenario, it still fell within the realm of what he'd expected. However, in the following moment, something unexpected occurred.

"Whooooa! Stop, stop! You can't do that!"

A high-pitched, panicked voice—seemingly a girl's—echoed through the intersection. Then, incredibly, the source of the voice latched onto the man's arm.

Huh?!

Ikki, despite focusing his attention solely on the man's pocket and making use of his incredible, time-slowng concentration, hadn't even reached the man yet. The blade of the knife hadn't even been fully removed from the man's pocket. Nobody else should have been able to get to him before Ikki—not without having physical abilities equal to his own.

Ikki hadn't even begun to expect that someone else would jump in; it took him completely by surprise. Worst of all, the girl's sudden clinging to the man pushed him aside slightly, putting her directly in his line of fire.

"Tch...!"

Ikki couldn't charge in with things the way they were. He had no

other choice but to decelerate until he came to a stop, the situation continuing to transform all the while.

“You can’t do this, sir!” the girl, with her high-pitched voice, screamed at the man who was still shocked at her sudden appearance. “It doesn’t matter how much your company restructures and goes into debt! You can’t resort to murder-suicide!”

Thanks to her screams, the people around them began to realize what was going on around them. The knife was still partially hidden within the man’s right pocket, but once the gleaming blade’s existence had been hinted at, everyone took notice of it.

“Wha—?!”

“H-Hey! This guy’s got a knife!”

“Huh? Aaahhh!”

“Eeeek! He’s a murderer!”

The crowd went into chaos. Some people shoved others out of the way, some tripped and spilled the contents of their bags everywhere, but everyone scrambled away from the intersection. Just the man and the girl clinging to him remained.

“You can still get off with just attempted murder. Let’s go to the police, okay? Your mom out in the country would be so sad if you hurt someone. Don’t worry, though! As long as you keep on living, your luck will turn around someday, right?!”

The girl cheered him on, her pretty face soaked with sweat yet still wearing a smile. She seemed to want nothing more than to soothe the man, but he refused to listen.

“You stupid braaat!”

“Whoa!”

His hunt interrupted, the man roared at the poor girl and shoved her away forcefully, her slender figure so light that she was easily pushed onto her backside. Then, a shadow fell upon the girl—the shadow of the man wearing a demonic expression as he brandished his knife.

Wh-What do I do?!

Watching the scene unfold from within the crowd of fleeing innocents, Ikki was unsure of what his next move was. Normally, he would fearlessly jump in to save her, but there was one factor that made him hesitate: the girl herself, who had appeared out of nowhere.

Nay, they were actually not a girl. The cuteness of their voice and features would lead one to believe they were, but that was wrong, because they were wearing Kyomon Academy’s boys’ uniform.

Ikki knew the boy’s face, too. At first, he hadn’t noticed, but he remembered upon taking a closer look. After the selection battles ended, Kagami had shown Ikki a list of the Seven Stars Battle Festival representatives for the year. The boy’s face was on that list.

Someone like him wouldn't go in without a plan.

Ikki couldn't remember his name, but he was a strong enough Blazer to make it to the Seven Stars. He wouldn't have shown up if he was going to be useless beyond spitting some cheap crime drama lines. He must have had some way, some ability to subdue the man, and as long as Ikki didn't know what that ability was, it was possible that he would only get in the way if he wasn't careful. That was Ikki's analysis of both the boy and the situation.

I'd best leave it to him, then.

"S-Somebody help meeeee!"

Just as Ikki finished his thought, the blond boy looked up at the knife being swung down at him and held his head as he screamed.

He didn't have a plan?!

Shouting internally at the shock of the unexpected distress call, Ikki immediately took action. He wouldn't have made it in time if he ran, but because of the pandemonium the fleeing civilians created, items lay scattered all over the ground. Among those items was a bottle of lipstick, which he kicked as hard as he could toward the man, hitting the knife in his hands with it.

"Ngh?!"

The sudden impact caused the knife to fly out of his hands and fall to the ground. Meanwhile, Ikki broke into a sprint and put his fist square into the man's face.

"Gah?!"

Blood gushed from the man's nose, drawing a parabola through the air as he fell onto his back and stopped moving. That single punch had knocked him unconscious. Anyone watching from the sidelines would have seen it as a splendid display of Ikki's skill. Ikki himself, however, was panting frantically, cold sweat trailing down his back.

Th-That was close! He seriously didn't put even a little thought into what he was doing?!

If not for Ikki having clocked the man, the boy would've been killed. He had been completely defenseless as the knife came down on him. Fighting back might have been overkill, but he hadn't even tried to protect himself with his Blazer abilities. All he did was freeze and cower in fear at the sight of the blade; his rash actions were even more horrifying than the knifer's.

"Ikki!"

"Haah... Stella! Could you call the police and tell them I've caught a knifer?"

"O-Okay! Got it!"

With the late-arriving Stella contacting the police, Ikki turned back toward the boy, still sitting on the ground, ready to read him the riot act. The boy had only been trying to prevent a tragedy in his own

way, however, so Ikki kept his complaints to himself and extended a hand.

“Are you hurt at all?” he asked.

“Oh, I’m okay. Thank you. You saved me.” Relieved, the boy smiled and thanked Ikki as he took the outstretched hand. “Huh?”

Suddenly, as soon as he got a good look at Ikki, his eyes went wide.

“...Uh, is there something on my face?”

“Ahhh! A-Are you Ikki Kurogane?!”

“Huh? Yeah, what—”

“Wow! Wooow! It’s the real Ikki!”

The second Ikki confirmed his identity, the very excited-looking boy, having not so much as finished standing up, pulled him into a hug.

“Wh-Whoa!”

“H-Hey! What do you think you’re doing, bub?!”

“I’m touched! I was already so eager to meet you, but here, of all places? How lucky can I get?!”



Ikki and Stella were equally confused by the abrupt embrace, but the boy, unmoved by their bewilderment, continued to express his excitement. He began hopping up and down like he'd been reunited with the best friend he'd lost contact with a decade prior, and beneath his long eyelashes, the tears threatening to spill from his bright-blue eyes betrayed his deep affection. He seemed truly, deeply happy to have met Ikki, but that made it all the more bizarre for the object of his affections.

Why would someone be so happy to meet me? he wondered.

"Who are—"

Stella acted before Ikki could finish his question, Stella jumped into the fray. Completely forgetting about calling the police, she ran over and grabbed the shoulder of the pretty-faced boy who had been clinging to her boyfriend. She then forced him back and stood between the two, protecting Ikki.

"What's with you?!" she cried, glaring threateningly at the boy. "You're wearing a boy's uniform, right? Are you gay or something? Because you're definitely acting like it!"

The boy was surprised at being pried away from Ikki so suddenly, but he quickly realized that the perpetrator was Ikki's partner, Stella. It was easy for him to guess why she was so angry, so he offered an explanation and an introduction.

"Oh, sorry, Stella. And no, I'm not gay, I just got so excited about meeting Ikki for the first time. Nice to meet you. I'm Amane Shinomiya, a first-year student at Kyomon Academy. Like you two, I was picked as a Seven Stars rep... and I happen to be a huge fan of Another One!"



Returning to their original objective after the police had received reports of the knifer and come to take him off of their hands, the trio entered a chain burger joint in the shopping district. The third wheel tagging along with Ikki and Stella was the boy who had introduced himself as Ikki's fan: Amane Shinomiya. He had offered to treat them to a meal as thanks for saving his skin.

"Mmm♪ I've never been to this place before, but these fries are delicious. They're so greasy and salty that I might just find myself addicted to ruining my health."

"I like them too, once in a while. Are you sure you're okay with paying for this, though?" Ikki asked Amane, who sat across from him.

"Definitely!" Amane responded, nodding emphatically with a cute, friendly smile. "I owe you my life, Ikki, so a meal at McDonald's is just a pittance."

By no means was "owe you my life" an exaggeration. Amane

would have been killed if Ikki hadn't stepped in. From his point of view, a meal to repay Ikki was the very least he could do, to stop himself from feeling awful about what had happened.

"...Then I gladly accept."

Catching on to that much, Ikki accepted Amane's goodwill as he unwrapped his burger and stuffed his face. The taste of it was so stimulating, yet still comforting. His and Stella's standard meal plan was mostly based on dietary science, so he rarely got to taste greasier food.

"So, you said your name was Shinomiya, right?"

Having already finished her own burger long ago, Stella suddenly addressed Amane while picking at the fries scattered about her tray.

"You can just call me Amane. We're in the same grade, after all. Besides, I should be the one addressing the princess respectfully; it feels weird the other way around."

"Amane' it is, then. So, you're one of Kyomon's representatives?"

"Yep, that's right."

"I haven't seen you at the training camp. Where have you been?"

"Oh, I just wasn't taking part in the training camp. I only just came out to this area today, so it's no surprise you haven't seen me."

"I see. Does that mean you're going to participate soon?"

"Nope. Soon as I bring some supplies to my upperclassmen at the camp, I'll be going right back home."

"That's a shame. You came all this way, so you might as well try it out for a while."

"Ahaha. Well, unlike you and them, Stella, I'm not all that interested in the Seven Stars. I'm really weak, and I don't know any martial arts, so there's no point in someone as useless as me taking part. I was only chosen because I happen to have a rare ability."

He didn't care about the Seven Stars, but he was chosen anyway. It wasn't a rare situation for schools that didn't use Hagun's and Bukyoku's systems, which involved real battle. Amane probably wasn't just being humble, either.

"So the reason you noticed the knifer was because of your rare ability?" Ikki asked, joining the conversation.

"What makes you think that?" Amane answered with a question of his own, tilting his head with his small neck.

"Just the process of elimination. Judging from your reaction when the knifer was about to attack you, it's clear that you don't know martial arts. But despite that, you reacted abnormally fast—so fast that it would be impossible for someone who hadn't trained themselves incessantly to do what you did. If that wasn't the result of martial arts training, then I figured the only other possibility was a Blazer ability."

“Wow, Ikki. The rumors about your insight definitely weren’t wrong if you could figure me out from just that.” A look of surprise spread across Amane’s face after hearing Ikki’s train of thought. Another One’s incredible insightfulness was sometimes said to be akin to an all-seeing eye, and Amane seemed happy to have caught a glimpse of it firsthand, as he spoke with wonder in his voice. “But I can’t tell you what my ability is. My teacher told me I can’t tell students from other schools about it. Sorry.”

“Oh, well, I don’t mind. We’re representatives too, so we get it.” The enemy knowing his ability could only be a bad thing, and Ikki had no intention of pressing him on it. “But Amane, if your ability isn’t useful for subduing an enemy, I’d suggest maybe being more careful next time. It’s your own life that’s at risk, after all.”

Ikki looked Amane in the eyes as he told the harsh truth, to which Amane nodded, dejected at Ikki’s sternness.

“Y-Yeah, you’re right... I got so frightened that I completely forgot about protecting myself with magic. If you hadn’t been there with me, Ikki, who knows what would’ve happened? I really was lucky. But...”

““But?””

“Thanks to that, I got to see *you*, my hero, in the flesh! Maybe I actually made all the right moves! I’m serious, man, you were like an actual superhero out there!”

Amane quickly transitioned from being regretful to grinning effeminately. Ikki felt his head start to ache, faced with the thoughtlessly optimistic boy.

W-Well, at least he’s not a bad guy.

“Oh, hey.” Amane seemed to suddenly remember something, reaching into his bag. “You see, I actually knew in advance that Hagun was coming to Kyomon’s training camp. I got a little excited when I thought that I might actually get to meet you, and, um, I brought an autograph card with me. Would you, maybe... let me have your autograph?!”

His eyes sparkled with excitement as he presented a gaudy-looking autograph card, ready to be signed.

“Huh? Y-You want me to sign this?”

“Yes! Do you mind?”

“Well, I don’t *not* mind, but...” Ikki was unsure of how to respond. His first fight with Stella had made him pretty popular at Hagun, so it wasn’t like he’d never been asked for handshakes or autographs before, but nobody had ever brought him something that solely existed to be autographed. “I don’t think a signature like mine should go on something so nice...”

Ikki, a lower-middle-class student, was starting to lose his nerve.

It felt wrong for him to sign such a thing, like it was something only entertainers were meant to do. While Ikki was busy making excuses, however, Stella chimed in with her own opinion.

“Who cares? Why not just write your name there?”

“But Stella...”

“This guy really looks up to you. There’s nothing wrong with showing him a little appreciation, is there? Besides, the one who decides the value of your autograph is the one receiving it, not you.”

“Ugh...” She was right. At the very least, Amane believed Ikki’s autograph was worth having; otherwise, he wouldn’t have asked for it. It would be wrong for Ikki to force his own sense of value on him. Thus, Ikki assented to Amane’s request. “But I really can’t do much better than just writing my name. Are you okay with that?”

“I don’t mind one bit!”

Once he had confirmed with Amane one last time, Ikki wrote his full name on the card. It couldn’t really be called an autograph, but it was his name.

“Wooww! Thank you, Ikki! I’m gonna frame this and treasure it for the rest of my life!”

Taking the signed autograph card, Amane nearly jumped for joy as he hugged it. Ikki chuckled at him, whose joy was similar to that of a child who had just been given the toy he’d always wanted.

He’s going to have my name hanging on his wall forever?

Maybe Ikki should have been proud that he’d earned the admiration of at least one person, but being treated in such a manner was too much for him, causing sweat to form on his brow. Before he’d met Stella, he’d lived a life in which praise and respect seemed like such distant concepts. That was why—to an extent, at least—maybe the deep discomfort he felt was natural.

But someone else had feelings very much unlike Ikki’s.

“You really do have a thing for Ikki, don’t you, Amane? Out of curiosity, what exactly is it about him that made you like him so much?”

Stella’s feelings were very unlike Ikki’s. The question she asked Amane centered the topic of conversation even more squarely on him.

“I like how he fights, and stuff. Using just his sword to cut through one powerful foe after another was really cool and stylish!”

“Wait, weren’t videos of the selection battles supposed to be banned from being shared?”

“They’re *supposed* to be, but there are heroes out there in every school who upload the videos for the rest of us. Bukyoku and Hagun make up almost all of the videos, seeing as they’re always fighting in front of big crowds. That’s how I’ve been able to watch all your fights from start to finish, Ikki! I downloaded them onto my student

handbook, and they're all on my heavy rotation with hundreds of views apiece! I even remember all of your lines! 'I'll use my greatest weakness to shatter your indomitable strength!'"

"Bah!"

Watching as his words and facial expression from his fight with Raikiri were replicated before him, it took everything Ikki had to stop the ginger ale he'd just drank from spewing out of his nose.

"Your catchphrase really gets me tingling! Oh, but I think I like the version from when you fought The Hunter more."

"H-Hey, how about we change the subject? C'mon, let's talk about something else! Okay?!"

"I'll use my greatest weakness to take hold of your greatest strength!"

"Aaahhhhh!"

"See, instead of shattering The Hunter, you took hold of him! It really packs a punch!"

"W-Would you cut it out?! I was just getting in the mood! When I'm in a battle, I just have to get in the mood, okay?! Please, just make it stop!"

Unable to take the embarrassment any longer, Ikki, his face so red that it looked like he'd spit fire at any moment, clung to Amane and pleaded with him.

"Aww, why?" Amane asked, seemingly disappointed by Ikki putting a stop to his fun. "I thought it was really cool. Right, Stella?"

"Y-Yeah, totally. Mm-hmm. Ikki's sooo cool... Pfft!"

Stella, roped into the discussion, had to hold back her laughter, tears in her eyes.

"Stella, look me in the eye and say that again."

"Hnnngh!"

She immediately looked away, but Ikki understood how she felt, so he couldn't really complain. Somehow, he had said those lines without the slightest bit of shame. The heat of the moment was truly a powerful thing.

"You're cool when you're fighting, but..." Ikki's fan, speaking highly of Ikki's charm, conveniently ignored how he squirmed when reminded of his own words and actions. "I think you're even cooler when you're just about to head into battle."

"When he's about to head into battle? What's that mean?"

"Right, so, it might be rude of me to say this, but Ikki really got the short end of the stick when it comes to strength as a Blazer. At the very least, he's definitely not blessed with talent. Even so, he's never complained about it even once. No matter how strong his opponent, no matter how much more blessed they are, he fights them with pride. The way he believes in his self-worth like that is just so incredible to

me.”

Amane declared just what had drawn him to Ikki in the first place, his confession spurring more surprise than embarrassment within Ikki.

He really is watching me carefully.

Believing in his own self-worth. That was, in fact, the very truth within Ikki each time he headed out into battle.

“Ahaha. It is kinda embarrassing to say this to you in person. I can feel my cheeks burning up.”

“...Trust me, it’s worse for me.”

“Haha! Sorry.” Amane laughed it off and stood from his seat.

“Well, I’d better get going.”

“Hm? You’re going to the campground, right? Let’s go together.”

“If I tried to keep pace with you guys on your daily run, I’d do more than just vomit up my food.” Amane declined Stella’s offer, also bringing up the fact that he hadn’t yet done the shopping for his schoolmates. Before he left, he turned to Ikki again and pledged his support with a smile. “Thanks for the autograph, Ikki. I’m always rooting for you to make it through every difficulty and stand at the top of the Seven Stars!”

It was quite strange to Ikki that he was being supported by someone whom he might end up fighting against during the Seven Stars. Considering how affable the boy was, though, Ikki saw no reason to mention that.

He’s honestly supporting me, so I’d better live up to that. Ikki smiled and went to thank him for his encouragement, but in that moment, a strange feeling welled up within him, leaving him speechless. *H-Huh?*

“Ikki...?”

“...Oh, uh, yeah. I’ll do my best. Thanks.”

After a moment’s silence, he finally squeezed out an answer.

“Well, later!”

Amane put on a dubious expression in response to the sudden silence, but Ikki’s reply must have satisfied him, as he grinned slightly and left the building.



After Amane left, Stella was all smiles while she enjoyed his leftover fries.

“Heheh. Looks like you’re good enough to make fans even outside the school now. It’s pretty crazy, considering where you started.”

“Yeah,” Ikki responded with a slight nod.

“So, Amane had a total crush on you.”

“You seem surprisingly happy about that, Stella.”

“Yep, I am happy. Not just because people are finally seeing how strong the guy who beat me is, either. More than that, Amane wasn’t focused on just your obvious strength. Instead, he had his eyes on one of the reasons I fell in love with you. That’s what made me happy. I doubt you mind yourself, do you, Ikki? It’s rare to have someone really ‘get’ you and want to support you all the more for it.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I shouldn’t mind it.”

“Ikki?” Stella noticed the way Ikki’s voice had faltered, and looked up from the food to his face. He had turned to look at the doorway Amane had left through, wearing a strained expression, though perhaps “strained” wasn’t the right word. Sweat was visibly forming on his face, even in the air-conditioned restaurant. “What’s wrong, Ikki? You’re sweating so much.”

“Hey, Stella?” Ignoring Stella’s question, Ikki asked his own. “What kind of person did Amane look like to you?”

“What kind? Well, he seemed nice, he had a cute face, and most of all, he seemed like he was really paying attention to you. I’d say he seems like a pretty good guy.”

“Yeah, maybe... You’re probably right...”

Stella’s answer prompted a groan from Ikki, accompanied by a furrowed brow.

Of course. There’s nothing to dislike about him. Still, though, I just didn’t get a likable impression from him.

Amane Shinomiya. His adorable, girly looks, his kindness in risking his life to stand up to the knifer, even if he couldn’t avert tragedy alone, and above all, his admiration and respect for Ikki. They were all reasons to like him. He should have been likable.

Nevertheless, Ikki realized something was wrong when Amane had turned to offer his encouragement and thanks as he left. It took Ikki a surprising amount of effort to force a smile onto his face. Amane’s words, his expression, his puppy-like affection—it would all normally have been likable. Everything about Amane that Ikki thought to be likable had actually failed to resonate within him.

What did it all mean? Not even Ikki understood why he wasn’t able to muster up a single ounce of affection for the boy. The indescribable, uncanny feeling created by that lack of understanding adhered to and weighed on Ikki’s heart like tar. He couldn’t take his mind off of just how eerie it was, so he opened his student handbook and made a call.

“Helloooo?” The call was answered immediately. “I don’t usually get calls from you, Ikki. Something wrong?”

“Hey, Kagami. Is now a good time? There’s something I want to ask you.”

“Sure, I’ve got time. I’m just having a little tea party with Alice

and the others. So, what did you wanna know?"

"Do you happen to investigate knights from schools other than Hagun?"

"Of course I do. I've taken a close look at every other school's representatives, more or less."

"Then do you know what Amane Shinomiya from Kyomon is like?"

"What he's like? That's a vague question if I've ever heard one."

"Yeah, guess you're right. Hmm..."

Ikki realized that his question was certainly too vague for her to answer, but what sort of knowledge about Amane would possibly help to soothe his unease? Unsure of exactly what he was looking for, Ikki labored over the question for a while.

"Well, it's not a big deal," Kagami told him after hypothesizing that he wasn't sure how to proceed. "Everything I know about Shinomiya is just as vague."

"Really?"

"There's not much info on him. He didn't even join his middle school leagues. What I do know, though, is that his Blazer ability is one of the rare types that can manipulate cause and effect; that's why he was chosen as a representative. Actually, there are a lot of people like him—no-name first-years who didn't fight in middle school—suddenly being picked as representatives this year. My only real impression of him was that he was one of those people. But now that you ask about him, I'm pretty interested too. Did something happen between you two?"

Ikki didn't know whether to mention his discomfort. After all, not even he was sure exactly why he had that problem. He didn't want to speak poorly of others without good reason, and most of all, he didn't even have the words to express the bad feeling he got from the boy.

"Oh, no. I just happened to run into him while I was out on a run, and I got curious about what he's like," Ikki fibbed.

"Huh. I didn't think he was at the training camp. Why's he here in Yamagata?"

"Apparently, he was doing some shopping for his upperclassmen."

"Maybe I oughta ambush him and get an interview. Heheh."

"Ahaha... Well, don't work too hard. Sorry for the random call."

"No prob! I'm sorry I couldn't help you out more. If I learn anything juicy, I'll come to you first!"

"Cool, thank you. Bye."

After thanking Kagami, Ikki hung up, unable to get any useful information. If even Kagami's sharp ears had heard nothing of Amane, then there really must have been no info on him.

“You’re probably overthinking this. I bet you two just don’t mix or something. One of you killed the other in a past life, or stole their wife, or maybe even both!”

“You really think so?”

“Some people just don’t get along with each other. It happens all the time.”

“...Yeah, you’re right. It’s probably something like that.”

“Some people just don’t get along with each other.” Ikki wasn’t sure something so simple would be enough to assuage his fears. Even so, given that he couldn’t adequately explain the reason he felt the way he did, there was little he could do but to agree and give up on it.

Despite how Ikki tried to convince himself that he agreed with Stella, his words rang false; he couldn’t wash away the unease that clung to his heart. An ill omen took over his mind, an awful foreboding for the future. Continuing to stare at the entrance of the restaurant, Ikki’s sole thought was that he may have just run into something horrifying beyond words.

HAGUN ACADEMY BULLETIN

CHARACTER TOPICS

COPYEDITING: KAGAMI KUSAKABE

YUURI OREKI

■PROFILE

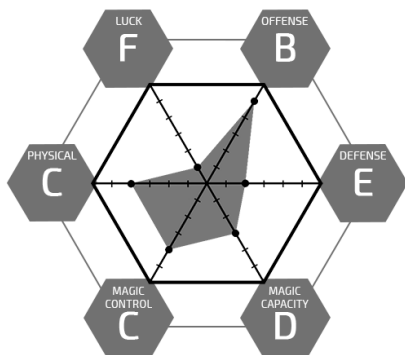
AFFILIATION: HAGUN ACADEMY

BLAZER RANK: C

NOBLE ART: LA PEINE DES
VIOLETTES

NICKNAME: JOLI ROUGE

SUMMARY: STAFF AT HAGUN
ACADEMY



KAGAMIN CHECK!

Instead of students, this series of Bulletins will focus on the Hagun Academy staff! First on the agenda is our homeroom teacher, Ms. Yuuri Oreki, who has the ability to share pain. She can make everyone nearby feel what she feels, and her range can extend several miles—she'll make hundreds of people writhe in agony if she has to! Her ability might seem plain, but given all the illnesses she's

got, a normal knight would faint in seconds from the pain she's always enduring. Since she doesn't need to get hurt to use it, it's good for punishing students who aren't listening in class... (((;°))) Scary!

©Won



The faint rays of the sun began to rise over the snowy horizon as Alice started on her way home, having just finished a job she'd received from her hometown's mafia. Because of the time of year, the temperature at dawn was lethal, but even in the air so chilly it felt like needles against the skin, the warm scarf knitted by her little sister was comforting.

"Heya, Alice," a voice from above suddenly called out to her.

She looked up to the top of a nearby wall to see a familiar redhead walking along it. She chuckled to herself, thinking that the girl was much like a cat.

"Hi there, Yuuri. It's not every day that we get to walk home together."

"Yeah." Yuuri hopped off of the seven-foot-high wall, landing next to Alice. Then, she held her shoulders as she shivered. "Ugh, so cold. That scarf must be real warm."

"Haha. Are you jealous?" Alice responded, flaunting the scarf ostentatiously after Yuuri shot her a greedy look.

"Here, let me try it on."

"Absolutely not. You'll just get it dirty."

"Wow. No one'll ever date you if you're just gonna let them freeze to death, you know."

"And you can't be girly only when it's convenient for you. But..." Alice moved closer to Yuuri and unwrapped her scarf a little, enveloping Yuuri's neck with it as well. "There. Now we can both use it."

"H-Hey, this is kinda weird..."

"Don't worry about it. We'll be warmer this way."

Yuuri's face blushed red, a seldom-seen feminine reaction from her, and Alice grinned at her mischievously. The two walked together like that along the still-empty city's new street. Along the way, they talked about the rite of passage they attempted before they left for work.

"If those two feel ready to be adults now, they must have grown so much."

"It's been two whole years since we took them in," Yuuri

reminded Alice. “But they’re still kids. When we were their age, we were a whole lot tougher.”

“...I’d rather not think about that,” Alice replied, her expression having soured.

“Rude. I’ve still got this scar from when you stabbed me.”

“I’ve got one to match, too. The whole reason I’m under you now is because I lost to you. Don’t start acting like *you’re* the victim here.”

Pouting, Alice reminisced about the past. Both she and Yuuri were orphaned Blazers. Because of their powers, it had taken a fair amount of time and bloodshed for their relationship to settle into what it was. The number of times they’d nearly killed each other over a little bit of food or a bed was too large to count on one hand.

But the two of them eventually tired of that fruitless existence in which they stole from others for their benefit alone. At the end of those wasted days, they exchanged a promise as they drank liquor together: *“With how strong we are, we can protect so many other kids. Instead of using our powers to steal, we’ll use them to give love to others. That’s the kind of ‘cool adults’ we’ll be.”*

With renewed determination, the two lived their lives in accordance with the vow they swore on the liquor. They took powerless orphans into their gang and looked after them.

“Come to think of it,” Alice continued, “we nearly killed each other on this road once.”

“Yeah. This place is a lot cleaner than it was when we were kids, though.”

Back when they’d fought, the cobblestone road they walked had been in such poor condition—so broken and gouged out in places—that not even cars were able to traverse it safely. Pedestrians were unsafe as well; any clueless travelers who happened to wander into the area were stripped of their possessions in mere seconds.

That dilapidated road had since been repaved with pristine white stones. The buildings that lined it had been repainted as well. Such renovations were made for reasons related to the posters that lined the walls all over, displaying five overlapping rings.

“It’s a huge event. People come from all over the world, so I guess they don’t want people seeing an ugly place.”

“An ‘ugly place’, huh?”

“The government came again, didn’t they?” Alice asked, having quickly gathered what Yuuri’s meaningful whisper meant.

“Yeah. Yesterday.”

Though she and the others were impoverished, Alice loved life. A modest lifestyle didn’t matter to her as long as she could be with all her friends. With the Olympics approaching and enthusiasm mounting, however, a shadow extended over their lives. The

government began hunting the homeless. As a country and as a city, they didn't want the world to see something so ugly.

Under that pretense, they began chasing homeless and street children out of the towns closest to where the event would be held. Despite that, the hunted weren't offered protection; they were merely beaten with sticks, kicked while they were down, and chased away like rodents. Alice's gang was, naturally, not exempt from the hunters' chase.

"Those jerks," Yuuri complained. "They said only you and me could be taken in. Just 'cause we have powers."

"That's not happening."

"Right. Without us, what would happen to Annie and the others? The Sister is on our side too, so she told them to go eat dirt. I seriously can't stand those government jerks."

"Well, we're an eyesore to them. They don't want us begging when there are spectators here."

They may not have been welcome, but Alice's gang wasn't ready to leave just because someone had told them to. Being forced into a place that they knew nothing about during such an intense burst of cold weather would be tantamount to a death sentence.

"If Annie and the others could at least be taken into an orphanage, we'd be free to leave. The two of us can live anywhere we need to."

"That would be tough. If it were that easy to find a caregiver, the streets wouldn't be full of kids like us."

Alice was right. The street children population was a problem the nation as a whole was faced with; they couldn't all be taken care of. No, perhaps they could have been, but no administrative action was taken to do so. The government was too busy building useless roads and empty museums to care for street children. The children had to live using only their own power, and if they wanted to survive, they couldn't be chased out during the cold season.

"I think our time is coming soon," Alice whispered.

"...Yeah." Yuuri nodded slightly. "We've asked too much of the Sister already. It'd be wrong to keep burdening her."

The nun was a good person, letting the kids take shelter in her storage shed. For so long, she had used her own paltry cash flow—she only owned a church in the slums, where money was scarce—to give the children soup. In their short lives, not yet even ten years long, she was the kindest person they'd ever met, but that made it all the worse for them as they watched her be yelled at and subjected to the city government's abuses. The children couldn't bear the sight.

"That's it, then!" Suddenly, Yuuri jabbed a finger in the direction of the distant rising sun. "Alice. When winter ends and things get a

little warmer, we're all leaving this city. I'm tired of cold places, so I say we go south."

You're pointing east, though.

Choosing not to correct her, Alice merely nodded. Yuuri was probably just pointing in the direction that seemed the warmest.

"...Sure. Let's do it. We'll find a warmer city."

Alice had actually been waiting for the right time to suggest that they move to a warmer city. The little siblings they looked after were bigger and stronger now, so if they could survive the winter, they would be able to travel a greater distance.

"Watch out, equator! We're coming for you!"

"This is our first move, so maybe aim a little closer," Alice sighed, though her expression showed no dissatisfaction. Her dreams were filled with thoughts of a warm spring journey, along with the hope that everyone would be able to live more easily in a new, warmer city in the south.

Those dreams, however, would never be realized. They would be set upon by abrupt tragedy, their happiness so easily wrenched from their hands. Not even Alice's modest happiness was safe.

Suddenly, a single black car passed next to Alice and Yuuri. An old man sitting inside the back of that car spoke to the driver, his secretary.

"Reconstruction isn't progressing much here, I see."

"Hmm? I think it's just fine," the secretary replied. "The main road just had its tiles almost completely redone, and the wall repainting is approaching completion as well."

"I saw filth hiding in the corner just a moment ago."

"You mean street children?"

"Even if you cover the place in Persian rugs, having filthy children like them around will sully the whole thing. If there are beggars running around during the Olympics, it'll hurt the city's reputation."

"But street children are a nationwide problem. I'm not sure we alone can do that. Not to mention that Yuuri's gang, the one that controls this area, is made up of nothing but small children. Its leaders are both Blazers, too, so there are some issues with mere officials like us laying our hands on them..."

"Coward! What do you have to fear from two mere children?!"

"Shall we have the police force them to leave?"

"Don't be silly. The chief of police is aiming for the mayorship in the next election. If I ordered him to do that, he'd be more than happy to call it inhumane and use it as a negative campaign against me."

"What would you have me do, then?" the secretary replied to his boss, who spoke with flippant disregard for the suffering in the area,

with a bored tone.

“Send garbage to take out the garbage, of course,” the boss replied nonchalantly, as though he were demanding his morning coffee. “It’ll save us the trouble.”



On the second-to-last night of Kyomon and Hagun’s joint training camp, the weather was, unfortunately, rainy. It wasn’t strong enough to be considered a storm, but large raindrops were loudly smacking against the windows.

Enjoying the pleasant background noise, Kagami Kusakabe of Hagun’s newspaper club inhabited a room in the facility the campground lent to them, organizing all of the materials she’d gathered during the training camp. The documents scattered under the light of a small desk lamp were both the notes she’d taken during the trip and student information that had been traded between the schools. On her laptop screen was information about other schools’ training camps, gathered by their respective newspaper clubs.

The amount of information available to Kagami gave her a bird’s-eye view of all seven schools’ trends and strengths. All her hard work was for the sake of a special issue of the Hagun Academy Bulletin that was to be published before the Seven Stars, and during the course of her work, she made a discovery. The impetus for that discovery was a phone call from Ikki Kurogane, who had expressed interest in Amane Shinomiya.

Truthfully, Kagami had had very little interest in Amane Shinomiya before Ikki’s call. Indeed, he was a mysterious knight; nobody even knew for sure what his ability was, but that wasn’t altogether surprising when Kagami considered that he hadn’t even joined his middle school league. Beyond that, schools were certain to keep their representative Blazers’ abilities private. Far from benefitting the schools, publicizing their students’ abilities would actually cause trouble for them during the Seven Stars.

With so many first-year representatives who never joined their middle school leagues and those reps’ lack of publicly known Blazer abilities, Amane Shinomiya was even less of a stand-out. Furthermore, to Kagami, Amane wasn’t the kind of knight to stand out as more than just another nameless rookie. He wasn’t someone who spurred her into further investigation by inspiring greater interest within her. There were many other representatives worth focusing on, such as the Gale Sword Emperor, Ouma Kurogane, the Crimson Princess, Stella Vermillion, and the current Seven Stars King, Yuudai Moroboshi.

Still, Ikki’s phone call had sown the seeds of interest somewhere in the corner of Kagami’s mind. That was why, as she organized her

information from the seven schools, Kagami decided to indulge in her interest on a whim. The result: Kagami was left completely aghast.

“What... the...? What’s with this kid?”

The mountains of northeast Japan were cool even in the summer, but that didn’t stop a cold sweat from creeping down Kagami’s back. Her eyes were fixed on Amane Shinomiya’s first semester grades, which she had worked very hard to obtain. There, the records of his class-sanctioned mock battles were written. Six wins in six battles—each one a victory by default. Kagami had seen the battle records of a great many students, but never had she seen one so eerie.

Speaking of things I’ve never seen before, there’s never been a Seven Stars with so many nameless freshmen participating. It’s almost like someone’s trying to gather all sorts of unknown knights together.

Perhaps because she’d seen Amane’s bizarre results, Kagami cast her mind back to something she hadn’t thought much of before, realizing just how unnatural it was. Was it mere luck? She had thought as much before, but was such a thing even possible?

In the modern world, if one was strong, they’d catch everyone’s attention whether they wanted to or not. How could so many first-year students have been strong enough to be chosen as representatives without a single one of them having attracted attention in the past?

“...Ah.”

Kagami came to the sudden realization that she was in the process of stumbling upon something huge. To make matters worse, it was something far too outrageous for a student like her to tackle alone.

That doesn’t mean I can just ignore this, though.

She had to pursue her discovery; that was what it meant to be a journalist. As such, Kagami scoured every last one of her notes in pursuit of solving the mystery that was the unknown students. All the information about the seven schools’ representatives, the members of their boards of directors and the Seven Stars Battle Festival’s management committee, and even the list of sponsors who cooperated with the management committee.

Utilizing her boundless information on all the cogs in the Seven Stars machine, Kagami Kusakabe finally, in the dead of night, after several consecutive hours of scouring, reached a conclusion. Her extreme prowess as a journalist, finely honed over time, allowed her to arrive at a truth that was meant to be unknown to her. As she looked over her lists of participants—documents with the names of students from all seven schools—at length, Kagami finally, indubitably cracked the code.

“There’s... an eighth school!” she cried. “...Huh?”

A burning heat immediately pierced Kagami’s back. Still looking

down toward her files, she watched as a dark grey blade sprouted from her chest. Kagami knew the shape and color of this blade, as it dimly reflected the light of her desk lamp.

I... knew it...

The dagger-like Device that had stabbed through her back was Darkness Hermit. The owner of that Device was...

“A...lice?”

“...”

Straining the last of her energy, Kagami looked behind her. There, she saw the face of her classmate and friend, colder than she’d ever seen it before. Nagi Alisuin’s lips then parted, and she spoke in a corpse-like voice that harbored not even a shred of emotion.

“You were too clever for your own good.”

After that, there was an audible squelching noise as the blade was removed from Kagami. No longer supported by the dagger, she fell forward, landing in the mountain of documents.

No... She tried to get up and run, but she didn’t have the strength to move a muscle. The fatal wound caused by Alice’s Phantom Form weapon mercilessly stole away Kagami’s consciousness, forcing her to black out. *Ikki... Stella... Be careful. This year’s Festival... is teeming with monsters!*

Unable to even scream, Kagami Kusakabe prayed that perhaps at least her thoughts could be communicated to her friends, then fell completely unconscious.



Alice crouched down to inspect Kagami’s fallen body. She had definitely fainted, and considering the circumstances, it would take at least a full day for her to awaken.

“What a shame. If you were just a little bit dumber, Kagamin, we could’ve still been friends for a few more hours.”

Kagami’s conclusion that there existed an eighth school was right on the money. Just as she had come to find, the upcoming Seven Stars Battle Festival was under the influence of some power working from the shadows—a power calling itself Akatsuki Academy.

A newly created school sponsored by a major organization, Akatsuki Academy existed for the sole purpose of causing the collapse of the Festival. There were only seven students enrolled, but almost all of them were elite members of the international terrorist organization known as the Rebellion. Akatsuki Academy’s seven students had infiltrated the other seven existing schools, each of them securing their place in the Festival.

By conquering the Seven Stars Battle Festival with an external force unrecognized by the International Mage-Knight Federation, they

hoped to make a mockery of the event. Kagami had deduced their existence, and as a result, she was dealt with.

“It’s really such a shame.”

As soon as she finished her sentence, the student handbook in Alice’s pocket began to vibrate. She had been getting calls incessantly, but had chosen to ignore them in favor of watching Kagami from the shadows.

Alice removed the handbook, different from Hagun’s, from her pocket. She knew who the caller was without even checking its display, as it only received calls from the one man who handled any and all communication between members of Akatsuki Academy: Reisen Hiraga, also known as Pierrot.

“Yes?”

“Oh, you finally picked up. And here I was starting to think you hated me enough to give me the cold shoulder.”

“Why would you ever think I like you?”

“A scathing rebuke indeed.”

Alice narrowed her eyelids, annoyed by the cackling coming from her handbook. Try as she might, she couldn’t bring herself to feel anything but hatred toward the sound of his voice. It was calm and easy to understand, but it contained a thinly veiled frivolity that made it seem as though he was laughing at all the world.

“So, why didn’t you pick up sooner?” Hiraga asked.

“I ran into some trouble.”

“Oh? What kind of trouble?”

“A girl from Hagun’s newspaper club was starting to figure us out, so I decided to shut her up.”

“...How much does she know?”

The voice on the other end of the line had taken on a slightly yet perceptibly more serious tone. In response, Alice picked up the last document that Kagami had looked at and began reading from it.

“Donrou Academy: Yui Tatara. Kyomon Academy: Amane Shinomiya. Rokuzon Academy: Sara Bloodlily. Bunkiyoku Academy: Reisen Hiraga. Rentei Academy: Rinna Kazamatsuri. Bukyoku Academy: Ouma Kurogane. Hagun Academy: Nagi Alisuin. She knows enough that she’s drawn stars next to the names I just gave you, which includes yours and mine.”

“Well then.”

“I wasn’t told about any of the members other than you, The Liaison, and Ouma, The Guest, so I can’t be sure whether or not this list is accurate. Seems that she’s got a vague idea of who we are, though, so I silenced her for the time being. Tell me, was her list correct?”

“My sincerest apologies, but I can’t divulge details about the

other members at this point in time. It would create too much risk. That said, the Eve will be carried out tomorrow, so you'll get to know each other whether you're ready to or not. Save the introductions until then. Still, though, even if I don't tell you about the others, you know this girl got at least three out of seven names correct. How do you think she found out?"

"From what I can gather of these documents, it looks like she was probing into the pasts of each representative. All of us have fake backgrounds, barring The Guest, so I suppose the cracks would show through under close scrutiny."

"I see, I see. All a result of our forgers being clumsy, then. I'll be sure to press them on that later. But anyway, good job. You did exactly what was needed of you, which is just the reliability I'd expect from the Black Assassin. By the way, how did you dispose of the clever little rat?"

"I just knocked her out for the time being. Oh, but if you want me to kill her, I will."

There wasn't an ounce of hesitation in Alice's voice despite the fact that they were supposedly friends just the day before. Her merciless, cutting voice was met with a flustered one from Hiraga on the other end of the line.

"Oh, heavens no! Covering up the murder would be too much trouble. Our Akatsuki Academy will be known to the world this evening one way or another; locking her away somewhere until then should be more than enough."

"That's fine. I was just poking a bit of fun, anyway. So, what business was so important that you had to call me about it?"

Alice rushed Hiraga to get to the point, practically hissing her question. She hated him. There was no point in them chattering away idly.

"Oh, it's not me that has business with you. There's someone here who wanted to chat. I'll put him on now," Hiraga said, then gave the phone to the "someone" he'd mentioned.

"It's me, Alice."

That voice caused Alice's expression to stiffen. Though she couldn't see the person speaking to her, she knew who it was. She could never mistake that stern voice, as heavy as lead.

"It's been a while, Master Wallenstein."

"That it has. I haven't seen you since you left for Japan."

Sir Wallenstein, the One-Armed Sword Master. As one of the Numbers—one of the twelve strongest Apostles within the Rebellion—he noticed the orphaned Alice's strength and raised her to be the group's most effective killer, nicknamed the Black Assassin.

"You're in Japan too, Master?"

“Of course. A supervisor has to be present on the scene.”

Wallenstein was already in Japan. That fact made Alice tense up slightly, likely because she dreaded the man’s strength. If he were a member of the Mage-Knight Federation, he would surely be a Rank A.

There were no weaknesses in his offensive or defensive abilities, and he excelled at swordplay. He was, without a doubt, one of the strongest fighters in the Rebellion. Having someone like him present to lead them in person meant that the Rebellion’s conspiracy against the Seven Stars Battle Festival was of the utmost importance.

“Well then, Master, what business do you have with me today?”

Keeping her greeting short, Alice got right to the point and asked Wallenstein why he had contacted her. In response, his stern voice answered her question with one of his own.

“Alice, you’re the greatest of all the students I’ve taken under my wing. The mafia, cults, terrorists... Every time we’ve used assassination during territory disputes with other organizations, no matter how important the target was or how hard it was to get to them, you’ve gone above and beyond in your work. There may be little point in asking you this now, but you are aware of your role in this, yes?”

Alice remained silent for a moment. Then, she closed her eyes as if coming to terms with impending farewells and spoke resolutely.

“Yes, I’m well aware. To that end, I’ve taken no shortcuts in my preparation. I’ve built a high level of trust between myself and Hagun’s strongest, so at the very least, my first move should go unopposed. Furthermore, my Noble Art, Shadow Bind, has the ability to render an opponent unable to fight with a single strike. You have no reason to fear, Master; I will make the Eve a complete success. I swear it on my name as the Black Assassin.”

“It soothes me to hear you say that,” Wallenstein said encouragingly, the smile evident in his voice. “We’re counting on you, Alice.”

“Of course. I’ll see it done,” she answered, nodding.

Leaving that exchange behind, Wallenstein ended the call. It was quite unusual for him to contact Alice, but perhaps it wasn’t all that surprising. The Eve was an order from the sponsor funding Rebellion. It was essentially a ceremony, a raising of Akatsuki Academy’s flag before their conquering of the Seven Stars. No failure could be permitted. If they botched the job, all of Rebellion and its sponsor’s machinations would go to waste.

Now then, Alice thought, I suppose my first duty is to clean up the mess in front of me.

To carry out the Eve as planned, Alice first had to hide Kagami and all of her documents until at least the evening. To do so, she

transferred magic into her shadow, which began to gradually swallow the unconscious Kagami and her papers.

“Don’t think badly of me,” Alice said. “I just can’t have any extra uncertainties getting in the way of the execution of our plan.”

Just like that, every last bit of evidence was spirited away.



With Kagami and her findings hidden, Alice returned to the representatives’ lodging. She made a beeline to her room and opened the door to find that the only light was coming from a small lamp. Within that light was Shizuku, lying in bed in her negligee and reading a small book.

“Welcome back, Alice.”

“Oh. Still awake, Shizuku?”

“I was just about to go to sleep.”

Shizuku gently flipped a page of her book. There were very few pages left in it.

“What are you reading?”

“*The Mother-in-Law’s Guide: 108 Ways to Torment a Newly Married Woman.*” Alice found that rather scary, but Shizuku spoke again after a brief pause. “...Leaving that aside, Alice, you’ve spent a lot of nights out partying recently.”

Alice racked her brain, contemplating how best to respond. She had overheard Ikki and Kagami’s phone call, leading to long outings at night so she could keep watch on Kagami. It was natural that Shizuku would be suspicious after several consecutive nights like that, especially on such a rainy one. Shizuku was a very discerning girl, sensitive to the workings of others’ hearts. Alice had to concoct a good lie, lest she see right through it.

“I’m not partying, silly. The Seven Stars is right around the corner. I have to make my own preparations, you know,” Alice replied in a roundabout way to avoid both lying and being honest.

“Right.”

Shizuku continued to read, giving only a short, disinterested response. Given the situation, Alice was nothing if not grateful for Shizuku’s general apathy toward others; what little interest and concern she had was directed at her brother, Ikki Kurogane.

I can’t help but to be jealous.

Emotion welled up within Alice. The coming day would be her and Shizuku’s last together. Once the Eve was over, she would distance herself from Hagun, never to return again.

“Hey, Shizuku? Mind joining me for a drink?”

Entering the room, Alice pulled a dirty bottle of whiskey from her suitcase in the corner. To remember their last night together, she

invited Shizuku to share a drink. Shizuku accepted the offer, slowly sitting up in her bed. She then turned her eyes toward the bottle that Alice held.

“Is that the drink we had when we went to the bar together that one time? The one that stunk like medicine?”

Right. Alice recalled their trip. *We went drinking to celebrate us winning our first selection battles.*

In reality, “drinking” might not have been the right word to describe what Shizuku had done. The strongest drink she'd had was a small sip of Alice's whiskey, and that alone had been enough to make her, teary-eyed from its medicine-like stench, down a whole glass of water as a chaser.

“Sorry, I forgot about that. Guess I'll just drink it myself—”

“No, it's fine,” Shizuku said as she moved from her bed to the sofa.

“Are you sure? I thought you didn't like it.”

“Just this once is fine. Today is a special day, after all.”

“Special”? Why? Did something happen?

Despite her questions, Alice didn't particularly care about answers as long as she could drink with Shizuku. She got out two glasses took a seat across from her friend, then poured the amber liquid into both glasses. Shizuku accepted the one offered to her and brought it to her nose.



“Ugh.” Her face immediately scrunched up in disgust. There was no way she would have gotten used to such a unique, pungent stench in such a short time. “You’re strange, Alice. There are so many other drinks out there, and most of them are easier to get down.”

“Haha, maybe. But I don’t think there would be any point if it were easy to drink.”

“Why not?”

Shizuku tilted her thin neck. Noticing her confusion, Alice looked toward the dirty-labeled bottle on the desk and spoke.

“It’s an old story, from back when I was a child. The kids in my neighborhood and I would always say, ‘Only adults are happy about drinking this gross stuff. That means anyone who can drink it is an adult.’”

“Teehee!” Shizuku had to stop herself from bursting into laughter. “What in the world? That’s some interesting logic. It’s cute, though.”

“You’re absolutely right. But for us, kids who could drink this became full-fledged adults.”

“I guess that was like a rite of passage for you and your friends, then?”

“It wouldn’t be wrong to see it that way.”

“Someone was a bad little girl. You weren’t even of age yet, were you?”

“Well, my home didn’t have any laws like that,” Alice answered before drinking the whiskey in her glass. The biting, stimulating alcohol in her mouth, the stench of medicine that rose to her nasal cavity. She was definitely drinking hard liquor. Incidentally, the brand she was drinking was so strong that it was controversial even among the whiskey-loving community. “Honestly, even I still can’t stand the taste of this.”

“Why do you drink it so much, then?”

“It’s like tasting my memories. But it’s not often that I drink from this particular bottle.”

“Hmm... Well, I don’t have any memories like that. To me, it’s just a crappy drink,” Shizuku commented, then gulped down the contents of her glass all at once. After that, she made a sour face. “Okay, yeah, I hate it. It hurts my throat, and I’m starting to get a headache from the smell of medicine on my breath.”

“You didn’t have to force yourself to drink it...”

“I’m fine,” Shizuku said, massaging her throat with her fingers. “Like I said, today’s a special day.”

“Special”. There was that word again. Curious about what she meant, Alice decided to ask about it.

“You said that before, too. Why is today special? Did something

good happen?"

"I'm not talking about me," Shizuku replied, shaking her head. "It's a special day for you, right?"

...*Huh?*

Shizuku's claim caused Alice's heart to skip a beat. She was right; it was their last night together. Once the sun rose and set again, Alice would be known as a member of Akatsuki Academy. Shizuku shouldn't have known anything about that, though.

"What makes you think that?" Alice asked, shock visible on her face like a deer in headlights.

"Because you've never invited me to do something with you before."

"Never? That can't be right. After Ikki fought The Hunter, we went drinking together, remember?"

"You were just thinking of me back then, because I was so worried about my big brother. You've never approached anyone, including me, for your own sake. You speak so intimately with everyone, you act so motherly, and you're so approachable, but you never let anyone else do those things for you."

Alice gulped inadvertently. As Shizuku had claimed, she was intentionally acting that way. She was pleasant toward everyone, as friendly as could be, but she never opened up or allowed anyone to get unnecessarily close to her. It was all an act; she had infiltrated Hagun with ulterior motives. At no point had she thought that someone had caught on to her behavior, but Shizuku had noticed, and it was honestly unexpected.

"I'm surprised. You really pay attention to me, Shizuku."

"Duh. You're like a big sister to me, Alice." Shizuku acted like it was nothing while letting a smile spread across her porcelain doll-like face. "This is the first time you've ever said something to me for your own benefit. I don't know why, but today must be special for you, right? Assuming it is, I'm more than happy to share a glass with you. But only one glass, okay? And next time, maybe bring a drink I can enjoy too."

Shizuku poked her lip out like she was pouting. Her cute expression naturally made Alice relax a little.

"Heehee. Just one is plenty. Thank you, Shizuku."



Probably fatigued from her many long days at the training camp, Shizuku started dozing off on the sofa shortly after she chugged her first—and only—glass of whiskey. It didn't take long for her to fall fully asleep.

Come to think of it, she fell asleep back at the bar, too.

Pondering if perhaps she was the kind of person who got drowsy when she drank, Alice lifted Shizuku off of the sofa, bridal-style. It was the summer, so she wasn't likely to catch a cold from sleeping on the sofa, but it was still poor etiquette to let her sleep there. As such, Alice decided to carry her to her bed.

"Mmn... Big Brother..."

Suddenly, Shizuku stirred in Alice's arms, talking cutely in her sleep.

"Heehee. I wonder what she's dreaming about."

"Stand aside, or I can't kill... Zzz..."

"Wh-What is she dreaming about?" Her face pale, Alice slowly lowered Shizuku down onto her bed, being careful not to wake her up. She then pulled a comforter over top of Shizuku, which prompted her to smile and curl up under it. "She's so cute when she's asleep."

Looking at Shizuku's adorable sleeping face, Alice sat on her own bed, next to her friend's. She then remembered the title she'd been given.

"Like a big sister', huh?"

Whispering to herself, she turned to look toward the sofa they were sitting on earlier. She gazed at the bottle of whiskey on the table, its label soiled and faded, as she cast her slightly lightheaded mind back, her memories a little hazy from the alcohol. Memories connected to that bottle, from before she was picked up by Rebellion as an assassin. Memories of her final day in a foreign land, where she and her friend Yuuri raised street children who thought of her as their big sister.

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She would never forget the freezing rain that morning. It wasn't quite snow, but it chilled the body even more than snow could. In that freezing rain, Alice opened a vinyl umbrella while facing a tall man.

That man was her Brigadier—her mafia group's captain. Alice handed the man the profits from her most recent job, from which he took fees and taxes. He then returned her portion of the earnings. As an underling within the mafia, however, he was not one to keep promises.

"...Hey." She was given back far less money than she was supposed to receive. "You said I'd get twenty percent—"

Alice's complaint was cut short by the man spitting on her face. He glared at her as though he was looking at garbage.

"Don't bitch at me, brat. Be grateful we're even letting you do business on our turf," he said before walking away.

"Thbpt!"

Once Alice had confirmed the man was gone, she blew a

raspberry after him.

We live in the same city, stupid, she thought as she wiped the spit from her face. She then dug around in a pile of snow, hidden in the shade. There, she found a plastic container wrapped in pink cloth.

“Guess it’s a little cold now.” Inside the container was a meat pie, given to Alice by her client. If that man had known it was there, he definitely would’ve taken it too. To avoid that, Alice hid it before their meeting. “It’s been so long since we’ve had meat. Everyone’s gonna love this.”

I’d better save some for the Sister too. Oh, but she’s leading a congregation today, so she’ll be in the next town over.

Alice hurried home, thinking of how she’d share the meal. She just wanted to see everyone’s smiling faces. When she arrived, however, she found that the door to the storage shed had been kicked in and left barely attached to the frame.

“...Huh?” Well-used to battle, she quickly came to the conclusion that some malicious party had attacked them. “G-Guys?!”

Alice screamed, dropping everything in her hands and dashing into the shed, but there was nobody inside. It was still very early in the morning; her little sisters shouldn’t have woken up yet. Even they were absent, however, having left only their dirty blankets behind.

What in the world happened?! Where did everyone...

The moment Alice lifted one of the blankets, her breath was taken away by what was hidden underneath. It was a bloodstain, still fresh enough that it hadn’t dried. Upon further inspection, she found drops of blood leading out of the shed, in the direction of the main road. They had been diluted by the rain, so much so that Alice wouldn’t have noticed them at all if she hadn’t discovered the horrid scene, but there was no question that they were there.

Alice leaped outside, in such a hurry that she tripped over herself as she followed the drops of blood. She had an awful, terrifying feeling that manifested as cold sweat trickling down her back. Blood meant that someone had been hurt; possibly one of her friends.

It can’t be! Even with nothing to back her claim, she tried to convince herself that it was all a lie. ...*Ah!*

As she walked out into the street in front of the church—the opposite way from where she came—she found that the truth had no compassion for even a child’s wish. A red-haired girl, her stomach soaked with fresh blood, was leaning weakly against a brick wall at the edge of the other side of the road.

“Y-Yuuriiii!” Alice screamed her name and ran to her side.

“Nh...” Yuuri reacted clearly to her voice. She slowly opened her eyes, gazing at Alice as she approached. “Oh... You’re safe, Alice... That’s... one good thing, at least.”

“What happened?! T-Tell me!”

In a mixture of pain and outrage, Yuuri’s face distorted.

“I dunno. Sergey and his men attacked us outta nowhere... Said they were ‘cleaning up the garbage’. Dammit... They took everyone with them. Cowards...”

“It was the mafia?! B-But why?! We paid all of their taxes!”

“Dunno... Gah! Ack!”

“Yuuri! D-Don’t say anything else!”

Each time she coughed, Yuuri spewed blood onto the black ice covering the ground. Talking would only make things worse; Yuuri had to see a doctor. Fortunately, the road was reasonably busy, so people walking along had taken notice of what was happening.

“Excuse me! Somebody, please get a doctor!” She screamed in hopes of someone listening. Much to her dismay, however, the people who’d been watching the spectacle unfold all turned to look away from Alice and Yuuri. They then rushed to leave the scene, as if they hadn’t heard a word she’d said. “P-Please! At least let me borrow a phone! I’ll even pay you!”

Alice continued to beg, but they all continued to ignore her. Though they had watched with great interest as the girl bled out, more than anything else, Alice’s voice seemed to scare them away as they separated themselves from the spectacle. It was as if all of them were trying to avoid the inconvenience of dealing with it. The sight was unbelievably cruel.

Huh? Wh-Why...? She’s bleeding so badly, and everyone’s just...

“Hey! You all have ears, right?! My friend is dying!”

“It’s not gonna work...” Yuuri struggled to speak in response to Alice’s heartrending cries. “Nobody’s... gonna help out. There’s no one out there who’d help street children like us... You already know that.”

“Ah...”

Alice was well aware that Yuuri was right. They were abandoned children, with no relatives or money. There was nothing to gain from helping them, and the onlookers knew as much.

“But we’re different, right?”

“Huh...?”

“We’re different from them... We’re cool adults...! Right?”

Alice opened her eyes wide. “Cool adults”. Those silly words held their shared vow and discipline. The day Alice and Yuuri first banded together, they made a promise over that liquor. They would cease living their lives thinking only of themselves; instead, they would help others, love others, the way cool adults were supposed to.

“Yeah. Of course we are! But why does that matter now?”

Yuuri didn’t respond to Alice’s question right away. She simply looked at her in silence for a while.

“Then you have to... go help them...”

When she finally spoke, her words suggested that she wouldn't be there to help. Alice, feeling an awful, uncomfortable foreboding, seized Yuuri by the shoulders.

“Wh-What are you saying?! Get real! You know I can't do that all by myself! *You beat me*, Yuuri!”

“Hehe... Yeah, right... We've been together long enough now... I always knew that you were... holding back so that you wouldn't kill me.”

“Gh...!”

“With your strength... I know you can protect them.”

“Shut up! I don't wanna hear your excuses!”

Tears poured from Alice's eyes as she screamed, while Yuuri merely gazed at Alice with a vacant look in her eyes.

“Please... Alice...”

Finally, Yuuri closed her eyes, as if falling into a deep sleep. All the strength seemed to leave her body at once.

“...Yuuri? H-Hey, come on. Answer me, will you?” She shook Yuuri's shoulders and raised her voice, but Yuuri never awoke, never opened her eyes. “You can't do this to me, Yuuri. We can't just sit here. We just promised each other we'd go south... remember...?”

Alice continued to plead, tears dropping from her cheeks. Of course, Yuuri did not answer; Alice knew that she would never wake up again.

It wasn't the first time Alice had seen such a thing happen, and it wouldn't be the last. Death was common in her city, but she still didn't want to accept it. She didn't want to recognize that even the place she tried so hard to protect had been so thoroughly stomped down. The truth was too painful to accept, but time paid no heed to her wishes in its endless, merciless march forward.

“Ooh, looky here, boys! Alice is back!”

“Good. Go capture the twerp. That one's worth twenty of them other little shits, though, so make damn sure you don't get that cute little face scratched up.”

Rough voices were accompanied by footsteps behind Alice. She turned to find that the same mafia members that she associated with were now approaching her, guns and Devices in hand. Before she knew it, they had surrounded her, brandishing their respective weapons.

“Why did you do this?” she asked, the light gone from her apathetic eyes. “We never missed a payment.”

“Heheh. Well, we got an order from some bigwig government guy to clean up the city. They paid us so much, it makes the money you scrounged up for us till now look like chump change. And since

they even offered us a bonus to sell you out, what reason did we have to *not* betray you?"

"It's eat or be eaten in the world of adults, kid. Give up, and don't even think about resisting. That is, unless you wanna end up like that dipshit over there."

One of the men reached out to take Alice by the hair and drag her off. She glared at his arm as it approached and began to think.

"Eat or be eaten", huh? I suppose so.

The men surrounding her had been alive much longer than she and her friends. Their claim was correct; if it wasn't, tragedies like the one that had just befallen her wouldn't happen. Society wasn't the one in the wrong. What happened was neither illogical nor unfair.

The philosophy of becoming "cool adults" was mistaken. That ideal had manipulated the children and led them to their downfall. It was all too clear, to the point that Alice had become painfully aware of the truth.

I'll steal everything from you monsters, she decided, just like you stole everything from me.

Right as the man's hand finally took hold of her hair, her vision was dyed red with the flames of rage.

"Ah... Aaaaahhhhhhhhhhh!"

Everything was over in an instant. When color returned to the world, Alice was inside the mafia's hideout, in a room that seemed as though it had been splashed all over with buckets of red paint. She was atop a pile of human carcasses that resembled minced meat.

Standing stock-still, she was covered from head to toe in blood and bathing in the steam that rose from the scattered entrails. With the color returned to her, she saw the corner of the room. There, her younger siblings trembled in fear, their teeth chattering audibly.

"E-Eep..."

"P-Please, d-don't kill us..."

"W-Wahhh..."

Their small eyes, clouded by a jumble of fright and despair, were pointed directly at Alice. The reverence they once held for her was nowhere to be seen. Not even shadow remained of their smiles, which had once warmed her heart. The moment she saw her siblings, Alice knew once and for all that she had both protected them and lost them forever.



When she came to her senses, Alice was alone in the rain with her umbrella collapsed, walking aimlessly like a wandering soul. She was soaked from head to toe, but she hardly noticed. It would have been silly for her to care about water when she was already drenched

in the blood of her victims. Occasionally, passersby would gawk in wide-eyed shock at her bloodstained figure, but they would quickly avert their eyes and move away. It didn't affect their lives if an orphan was covered in blood or even near-dead.

She had stopped being angry about it, and she experienced neither sadness nor frustration. Every emotion had left her body as the tears that had since run dry, but she decided that was for the best. Her dear friend's last moments as she lay dying in her arms, and how her siblings had all looked at her with such intense fear—the pain of losing those she loved and was loved by—were still fresh in her mind. She was happy to be rid of her emotions if it meant she wouldn't hurt the way she had before.

"I never thought a child would beat me to the punch."

Suddenly, the wandering spirit heard a voice from behind her. Alice turned slowly, sluggishly, toward the source of it, searching with her murky eyes. When they finally stopped, her eyes were fixed on a gentleman dressed in a black robe.

The man was gazing at her, his expression and aura familiar to the girl who had lived her whole life surrounded by violence. By no means was he a decent man. He was something far less human than even the mafia Alice had just slaughtered. Even so, she felt no fear; fear was just one of the emotions that had been washed away by her tears.

"Who are you?" Alice asked, undaunted.

"I'm just a dimwitted assassin who had his prey stolen by a child."

The gentleman's answer revealed that he'd been sent by the mayor to clean up the garbage known as the mafia. It was so unbelievably ironic. They had called Alice's gang "garbage", but while they had been trying to take out that garbage, they were disposed of themselves.

It's all such a farce.

"And? Here to complain?" Alice asked the assassin as a sardonic smirk spread across her face.

"I'd never," the gentleman replied. "I'm only here to give you your cut, since you did my job for me. This is for you."

The man pulled something like a ball out of his robe and rolled it over toward Alice. That ball-like object was actually an old man's head—the head of the city's mayor, the man who had made the decision to dispose of Alice's gang. She looked down at it, showing no signs of shock.

"What a thoughtful gift. Heheheh... Ahaha..."

She wasted no time in stomping on the head, laughing from the bottom of her heart as she did so. Yuuri was killed by the mafia, the

members of which were, in turn, meant to be killed by the machinations of the mayor, who ended up being killed by the self-proclaimed assassin standing in front of her.

This world really is something else. Alice was surer than ever. She'd always thought that hell was somewhere a person went when they died, but what could have possibly been worse than the hell she was already living in? To try to protect something in such a world, to love something, was beyond ridiculous. *God. We were all such fools.*

"The realization that you've just reached is correct." The gentleman suddenly spoke, interrupting Alice's hoarse laughter. "Love, money, ethics, morality—the whole world's full of lies like that. So much deception, so many excuses soil and obscure the truth. There's really only one hard and fast rule: The strong take everything, while the weak lose everything. The greatest from among us impose their will upon society. That is the world's sole providence. Now that you've come to this realization, you have what it takes to become one of us. We, Rebellion, will convey the truth to this deceitful world. Your talent for killing will be of use to us. Come with me, child."

"And if I say no?" Alice asked of the invitation to a world yet darker than the one she was already in.

"I already told you that the strong will take everything. That's the truth of society. If you refuse, then I'll prove firsthand how true it is and take you by force."

Bloodlust emanated from the man's every orifice. Alice, however, was affected by it no more than she would be by a slight breeze. The threat of violence was nothing to her; violence existed to take from others, and she had nothing left to take.

"Heeheehee. Interesting. I love the simplicity of it." It was precisely because she had nothing that Alice was interested in the offer. "I don't really mind. I have nowhere left to go and nothing left to protect, after all. So, if you accept one condition, I'll join you."

"What's your condition?"

"A hundred million. Give me a hundred million and I'll do your dirty work."

"A hundred million for a kid with no background? That's a steep price." The man's already-severe face hardened yet further. "And if I refuse?"

Alice laughed mockingly at the man who mirrored her question.

"There's no need for me to explain that to you, is there?"

All she had to do was take it. She desired money, and no paltry sum of it, either. The simultaneous insolence and desperation were enough to make the man take a liking to her.

"...Heheheh. You certainly are an interesting one. All right, I'll get your money." He readily assented to Alice's outlandish demand.

“So, kid. What’s your name?”

“Everyone calls me Alice.”

“I’m one of the twelve pillars of the Numbers, the One-Armed Sword Master, Wallenstein. Welcome, Alice.”

Extending an arm from his robe, Wallenstein offered a handshake. Alice responded in kind, sealing their contract. She would take every last bit of the money given to her and give it to the nun in order to cover the cost of rearing her remaining siblings. Then, she would cut all ties with the city and leave once and for all. Just as Wallenstein desired, she would devote the whole of her talent for killing, once suppressed by falsehoods like ethics and morality, to the Rebellion’s cause.

At long last, the first chapter of the life of Nagi Alisuin, the Black Assassin, had come to a close.



It truly is an absurd story.

Looking back on her old life, Alice let out a chuckle. Though it was all for the sake of her infiltration, she found it ironic that she was once again playing the role of an older sister to her peers. But that farce was about to end. Soon, those false relationships would be severed. What would be the look on Shizuku’s face when that happened?

Alice recalled the horrified faces of her siblings, the absolute denial and disgust in their eyes as they looked upon a murderer. Shizuku, too, would probably hate and fear her. She wasn’t especially sad about it, though; their relationship existed solely for appearances, to make Alice’s job easier. Lorelei was a Rank B knight, one of the key players of Hagun Academy. Treating her like a younger sister was the most efficient way to close the distance between them. There was nothing more to it.

HAGUN ACADEMY BULLETIN

CHARACTER TOPICS

COPYEDITING: KAGAMI KUSAKABE

NENE SAIKYOU

■PROFILE

AFFILIATION: KING OF KNIGHTS A-LEAGUE

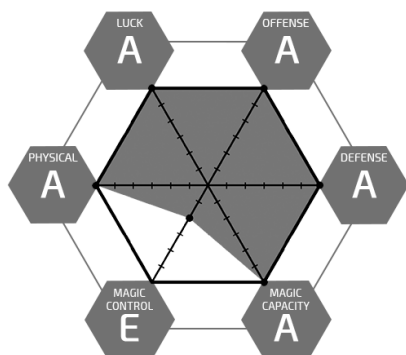
BLAZER RANK: A

NOBLE ART: FORBIDDEN ART:

HADOU TENSEI

NICKNAME: DEMON PRINCESS

SUMMARY: TEMPORARY INSTRUCTOR
AT HAGUN ACADEMY



KAGAMIN CHECK!

Next up is the gaudy Kok A-League fighter and the third-strongest knight in the world: Nene Saikyou, the Demon Princess. Her Device is a pair of steel fans, and her nature manipulation-type ability controls gravity. Her Noble Art, Hadou Tensei, crushes her foes with debris from outer space! It's the best Noble Art there is in terms of raw power, but it can wipe out entire nations, so it was named a Forbidden Art and can't be used without the Federation's permission. She used it against Mrs. Shinguuji (née Takizawa) anyway, though. If it hadn't been stopped, Japan would probably be a crater right now...

©Won



On the final evening of the joint training camp, Yuuri Oreki, a member of Hagun Academy's staff, was sweeping around the school's front gate in preparation for greeting the returning students. It was then that a lone girl in a tracksuit greeted her.

"Hi, Ms. Oreki."

She turned toward the voice. It was a girl that she had never taught, but whom she had some memory of. She had supervised one of the girl's selection battles at some point. She dug the name out of her memories and returned the greeting.

"Oh, hello there, Ayatsuji. Cough."

"Thank you again for what you did for me."

The reason Ayase bowed her head in gratitude was related to her battle with Ikki Kurogane.

"I didn't do a thing. It was all thanks to Kurogane's efforts."

"But Ms. Oreki, you were the one who tolerated my rule-breaking. If you'd stopped our fight, I'm sure I would never have been able to let go of the past."

"That was all because I'd already talked with Kurogane about it, cough. Aside from that, Ayatsuji, did you decide you were going to stay here? I figured you'd have gone home for the summer to take care of your father."

"I wanted to join him in his rehabilitation, yes, but he wouldn't have it. He said that I'm a growing young woman and that I shouldn't use this time to slack off on my training. Supposedly, he can make it on his own."

"Haha, that certainly sounds like the Last Samurai."



“After two full years of sleep, he honestly seems livelier than ever. I decided I should try to keep up with him, so I just went for a run.”

“How prudent of you! I’m sure your other master is hard at work right now, too.”

Ms. Oreki looked up at the deep blue northern sky. Ayase muttered her agreement and looked up along with her.

“Kurogane really is incredible. He even beat the student council president despite his awful condition.”

“He certainly did. Even I was a little surprised, and I’m his teacher.”

“I heard a rumor that you were the one who proctored his entrance exam. Is that true?”

“Cough. Yes, it’s true.”

“You certainly have an eye for talent.”

In terms of his certification, Ikki was a Rank F; he wasn’t even qualified for entry into Hagun. The fact that he was enrolled despite his rank was presumably thanks to, as Ayase had praised her for, Ms. Oreki’s keen eye. However, she shook her head with an apologetic expression.

“Oh, no, not at all. Honestly, I tried to fail him.”

“Really?”

Ms. Oreki nodded. Her impression of Ikki when they’d first met was that he had an uncanny lack of talent. She hadn’t had even the slightest intention of letting him pass, so she’d given him one final opportunity, intending it as a mere formality. Ikki was offered a single chance to sell her on his worth as a Blazer.

“You know what that boy said to me?”

“What?”

“‘I can beat you in a fight right now’.” A child, not even out of middle school, had claimed he could defeat her, a full-fledged Mage-Knight and educator. “I couldn’t believe my ears. Such a bold statement came as quite the shock.”

“H-He was quite confident in himself.”

“Cough. And after that, he actually won! No matter who the proctor was at that point, there was no chance he wasn’t getting in.”

“I see. That’s quite the story...”

Ayase nodded, amazed at the details of Ikki’s entrance exam. Ikki had probably known at the time that he wouldn’t have been able to get in via a normal examination. That was why he’d so boisterously challenged Ms. Oreki to a duel, creating a chance for him to show what he was made of.

Ayase began to think. No matter what he lacked in power or ability, Ikki made up for his inferiority through some other means,

forging his own path. It seemed very like him. She had no doubt that he was still—and would continue to be—the same way he was back then.

“Ms. Oreki, do you think Kurogane can be the next Seven Stars King?” Ayase asked, the strong, determined image of Ikki still in her mind.

“I may be biased because I’m so close to him,” Ms. Oreki responded, “but I think he has the strength to do so. Then again...”

“Then again?”

“In this year’s Festival, just being the defending King might not be enough for him to make it all the way.”

“Is that because his older brother, that Rank A, is going to be there?”

Ms. Oreki cleared her throat and nodded in agreement, then began elaborating on her earlier, seemingly pessimistic statement.

“Well, partly, yes. But even more than that, there are so many kids this year that we know nothing about. Just about every school has some nameless first-year with abilities we can’t even pinpoint the nature of. I think the progression of this year’s Seven Stars Battle Festival will be greatly influenced by those kids.”

“Wow. With Stella in the mix, this year’s Festival is ripe with exciting new people.”

Though Ayase’s words seemed inoffensive, Ms. Oreki closed her eyes in silence. Indeed, “ripe” was an apt word. A typical year saw only one or two first-years making it to the Festival in total. It wasn’t uncommon for that number to even be zero.

Taking that into consideration, having ten first-years in the upcoming Festival definitely seemed to make it exceptionally ripe with newcomers. Something about that just didn’t sit right with Ms. Oreki, though. There was nothing wrong with first-years being representatives, but the inclination toward unknown ones was questionable.

It’s like they’ve been lying in wait for this.

Asking Ms. Saikyou and Director Shinguuji for their thoughts once they’d returned from Osaka seemed like her best option. However, while she pondered the matter, Ayase pointed toward the gate and spoke.

“Hmm? Ms. Oreki, there’s a bunch of people coming this way.”

Ms. Oreki then turned her eyes toward where she was pointing. Like she had said, seven shadowy figures were lined up, approaching Hagun Academy. It was a rare sight for a mandatory-residence school like Hagun, and given that it was summer vacation, it was even more bizarre that such a large group would come all at once. Stranger yet, two of the seven were riding on a beast that almost appeared to be a

huge lion. Ms. Oreki narrowed her eyes. Who could they possibly have been?

“Oh? Is that...”

Her narrowed eyes opened in surprise. She recognized one among the seven from long ago.

Is that Ouma Kurogane, Bukyoku’s Rank A?!

The question of why a student from Bukyoku would be coming to Hagun swirled around her mind, but it was quickly forced out of her thoughts. The sight before her confirmed that something strange was going on, something much more important than the trivial question she had been preoccupied with.

It’s not just Ouma. Reps from Bunkiyoku, Donrou, Rentei, and even the other schools...!

The people walking alongside Ouma were all familiar faces from the Seven Stars Battle Festival documents that Ms. Oreki, a member of the Festival staff, had received. A representative from each of the other six participating schools—plus one extra—was present. Worst of all, the nameless first-years that Ms. Oreki had just expressed her misgivings about were all in the lineup.

An indescribable chill ran down the nape of Ms. Oreki’s neck. Why were representatives from all of the other schools gathering? Why were they heading toward Hagun? Why did it create such an awful feeling in the pit of her stomach? Why were they all holding their Devices?

“Ayatsuji! Get away from here, now!”

The questions that assaulted Ms. Oreki’s mind all at once were answered immediately. One of the seven, a girl wearing a winter coat despite the summer heat—Yui Tatara, one of Donrou’s representatives—suddenly leaped toward Ayase, as quick as lightning. Using both hands, she swung her chainsaw-like Device down on the defenseless girl.

“Huh?”

The malicious assault was so abrupt that Ayase was completely unable to react. Tatara’s roaring weapon came down upon her, but just before it could lop her head off, Ms. Oreki repelled it with her cutlass Device. Her skillful parry caused Tatara to lose her balance—an opportunity she wasn’t going to let go to waste.

I have to stop her!

Deciding to stop the girl’s assault first and figure out why she had so suddenly come for blood later, Ms. Oreki deftly flicked her wrist. Her counterattack, aimed at the assailant’s carotid artery, was so fast and efficient that it left the girl no way to evade. The cutlass, materialized in Phantom Form, was going to knock her unconscious, but her lips merely curled into a wicked grin.

“Total Reflect.”

Just as Tatara’s neck was about to be pierced, a mysterious impact deflected Ms. Oreki’s blade.



In the evening, with the sky dyed a burnt orange hue, a bus was concluding its journey from Yamagata to the area near Hagun Academy. On that bus was Ikki’s team of representatives and the people who’d helped them, like Shizuku and the student council. Friend groups sat together, sharing candy and chatting away with not a care in the world. Among them, however, a miserable-looking Stella’s shoulders were drooped.

“Haaah.”

“C’mon, Stella. Chin up.”

“I’m just so frustrated...”

Though Ikki, sitting next to her, tried to cheer her up, Stella couldn’t regain her vigor. As if following up his attempt, two female students, the twins Kikyuu and Botan Hagure, addressed her.

“What’s wrong, Stella?”

“Did you get carsick, Princess?”

“Seems like she’s frustrated that she couldn’t outfight Toudou.”

Ikki waved his hand to gesture that there was no need to worry, and communicated to them why Stella was so down.

“Oh yeah,” one of the sisters replied, “you two did fight a bunch. What was the final score?”

“...We tied. Three wins each,” Stella whimpered quietly.

Stella’s one goal at the training camp had been to surpass Raikiri, but she’d failed, unable to win more than half of their duels. She was so disappointed in herself that she couldn’t stand it.

“But against the student council president, even a tie’s incredible.”

“Stella’s a Rank A, though. It only makes sense that she’d want to beat someone weaker than herself, right?”

“I don’t really think Touka is weaker than me.”

Stella argued Kikyuu’s claim. She had actually expected the opposite; Stella believed herself inferior to Touka. The very reason she’d wanted to surpass her before the end of the training camp was so that she could look out on the coming Seven Stars Battle Festival with confidence.

But the result was not what she had expected.

“Aaaargh, I’m so mad!” Stella yelled. “I can’t stand sitting still right now! I might as well have just ran home instead!”

“I think that’s going a bit too far...” Ikki chuckled, knowing Stella wasn’t actually being serious.

“At times like this, the only way to get my mind off things is food.”

Upon saying that, Stella pulled three Snackers bars out of her bag and began devouring them, still curled up in despair. The Hagure sisters gasped in shock as they looked upon her.

“You had three servings each of udon and ramen at the rest stop. You’re *still* hungry?!”

“You’re gonna get fat!”

“I’ll be fine. No matter how much I eat, I never get fat,” Stella responded, thinking nothing of the strange phenomenon.

Somehow, Stella was a ridiculously big eater, yet her body remained tight and fit with no traces of excess fat. Even to Ikki, who thought he had a grasp on the inner workings of the human body, it was a mystery. He had simply chalked it up to some sort of inherent injustice and had long since accepted it. The twin upperclassmen, on the other hand, were hearing of it for the first time and were appalled, their faces frozen momentarily while her statement sunk in.

“What?!” they cried out simultaneously.

“...Botan. She had the tofu, curry, and tempura udon. After that, she had the soy sauce, miso, and pork ramens. If you ate all that, and then you even scarfed down Snackers to top it off, you’d definitely get fat, right?”

“That’s the only possibility, even if she’s using weird occult magic. She must be hiding some belly rolls under those clothes.”

“I-I am not! How rude! Any fat just happens to go right to my chest. I’ve never been all that fat in my entire life.”

While Stella retorted, still chomping down her super-fatty candy, Ikki bore witness to the very moment the sisters snapped.

“Don’t lie to us!”

With demonic looks on their faces, the Hagure twins fell upon Stella in a fit of rage. They grabbed her shoulders and yanked her from the bus seat, pinning her down.

“Whoa! Hey, what are you two doing?!”

“Shut up! I know you’re hiding a gut under there! Hurry up and confess, or else!”

“I told you, fat collects in my *chest*!”

“You think I’m gonna believe that?!”

“I swear, there’s gotta be a fat roll or two somewhere!”

The twins lifted up Stella’s shirt and started fiddling with her bare skin.

“C-Cut it out, already!” Stella screamed, her face getting redder by the second. “Where do you think you’re touching me?! Ikki, stop sitting there like a lump and help me!”

“Oh, u-uh, sure! Um, hey, you two should calm—”

“This is a sacred war between women. Butt out!”

“Just shut up and eat some Rocky or something, *male!*”

Ikki’s attempt to mediate was immediately shut down by the girls’ bloodshot eyes, like those of predatory beasts, locking onto him.

“Oh, okay. Sorry.”

“Ikkiiii!”

They’re too scary for me!

Intimidated by their glares, Ikki chose to avert his eyes from what threatened to turn itself into an international incident, when suddenly, the seat next to him became occupied. Though it had been made vacant by Stella being dragged out of it, it now housed a small, silver-haired girl: Ikki’s sister, Shizuku Kurogane. Her green eyes watched the struggle on the floor of the bus, and she decided to poke fun.

“If Kusakabe were here to see this, she’d be more than happy to plaster photos all over the newspaper.”

“Ahaha, definitely. She’ll be so mad when she hears about this later.” Ikki agreed with Shizuku’s observation; as a matter of fact, Kagami probably would have wanted to join in. He then directed a question toward Alice, who sat in a window seat on the other side of the aisle. “So, you said Kagami was off to visit Hokkaido by herself or something, right?”

“Yes,” Alice responded, nodding. “Rokuzon’s training camp started three days ago, so she left first thing in the morning in search of a scoop.”

“Shame she couldn’t come with us.”

Of course, Alice was lying. Kagami was actually bound by her hands and feet, locked up in a facility at Kyomon’s training camp. However, with no evidence that she was lying, and no reason to doubt her in the first place, Ikki believed Alice’s statement.

“What a workaholic she is,” Shizuku, who also believed the lie, said with a sigh of both annoyance and admiration. “I’m already exhausted.”

“Sorry. Thank you so much for coming, Shizuku.”

Given her superb healing ability, Shizuku’s presence at the training camp had made a major difference. iPS Capsules were certainly convenient, but using them required full-body anesthesia, so they still placed a burden on the user. That was why Ikki had brought her with him to Yamagata despite her failure to become a representative. He was deeply grateful for her help with healing less serious wounds.

“Anything for you, Big Brother.” Shizuku flashed Ikki a lovely smile, one that nobody else would be blessed with, then held out the box of Rocky she was holding. “Would you like one?”

“Maybe just one.”

Ikki wasn't especially fond of candy, but he was happy to try anything his sister offered him. He reached for the Rocky and attempted to remove a stick, but just as his fingers brushed the end of one, the characteristic red box was snatched away from him.

Huh?

Ikki didn't understand why the box had been moved. Meanwhile, Shizuku put on an innocent face as she took one of the sticks and held it between her pale-pink lips. Then, as if beckoning a kiss, she pointed both her lips and the Rocky within them toward her brother.

“Mmm~”

“Wh-What exactly do you want me to do?!”

“H-Hey!” Ikki had faltered at the sudden attack, but his girlfriend refused to watch in silence. “What the hell are you trying to make Ikki do here, Shizuku?!”

“Ah!”

“Eep!”

As if they hadn't had her pinned her down, the Hagure sisters yelped as Stella shook them off with ease and closed in on Shizuku.

“It's just a little bit of sexual harassment. What's the big deal?”

“How can you be so shameless and so nonchalant at the same time?! Don't you think that's improper?!”

“Quite hypocritical of you to say that when you're undressed in public.”

“Huh?” Once it was pointed out to her, Stella finally took notice of her condition. She didn't know what to say. The Hagure twins' manhandling had left her shirt open, exposing her bra, and her skirt falling off. “N-Noooooo!”

Overwhelmed by the sudden turn of events, Stella stopped for a moment, allowing her thoughts to finally catch up to reality. Her face became so red-hot that it looked like fire would spew from it, and she curled up on the spot in shame.

“Whoa, *someone* looks like she's been getting busy,” Utakata whispered, watching from afar. “Pretty hot...”

“I'm going to make you regret that when we get back to school, Uta,” Touka warned.

“Eek! Kanata, help! I don't wanna face consequences!”

“I'm not the one who stuck their hand into the hornets' nest,” Kanata replied curtly. “You'll have to figure this one out yourself.”

As a woman of character, Stella would not lose heart so easily. She quickly righted her clothing and approached Shizuku anew.

“Shizuku! Didn't you say you accepted my relationship with Ikki?”

“You mean your whole lovey-dovey relationship?”

“Yeah, that one!”

“Then yes, I did say that.”

“O-Okay, so s-stop doing that!” Stella shouted in discontent.

“Wow, is that it?” Shizuku scoffed. “You should learn to be less conceited.”

“Wh-What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“I said I’ve accepted your romantic relationship with my brother. But that’s the only way you can have him. I give my big brother a sister’s love, a mother’s care, a friend’s adoration, and even a partner’s caress.”

“Uh, Shizuku? I don’t remember you doing anything like that last one,” Ikki objected, but Shizuku ignored it entirely, thrusting four fingers toward Stella.

“In short, I love my big brother four times more than you do!” she declared. “Surely even *you* can see the thorough logic guiding me to my airtight conclusion.”

“I sure as hell can’t!” Stella’s reaction was natural, for Shizuku had clearly crossed the line into absurdity. “Cut the weird complaints and get away from Ikki! That’s my seat!”

“I don’t see your name on it!”

Stella finally decided to peel Shizuku away from Ikki by force, but she continued to resist by clinging to her brother. It was then that Ikki finally spoke, tired of watching the spectacle.

“H-Hey, c’mon, Stella. We shouldn’t make a scene on the bus. It’s dangerous.”

“Aw, but...”

“It’s just the ride home. Might as well leave her, right? Besides, we’re almost back at Hagun already.”

Ikki turned to face the scenery as it glided by. The bus had already passed through the city, arriving at the familiar trees and asphalt that formed the mountain path that Ikki and Stella jogged along every morning. Hagun Academy wasn’t far.

“Rgh... Fine, then. But you’re making up for this when we get there!”

There was no reason to fight for just a few minutes of time in a seat, so Stella withdrew. However, before she could find a new place to sit for the remainder of the journey, the bus driver abruptly slammed on the brakes.

“Ahhh!”

“Whoooa!”

The rapid loss of momentum threw all of the passengers forward. What could have happened to warrant such a sudden stop?

The first one to act was Touka. The student council president immediately got to her feet and ran over to Saijou, who was driving

the bus. Normally, Saijou wasn't the type to show his emotions, but he was staring out the windshield, pale and dumbfounded.

"Wh-What's wrong, Saijou?! Did we hit something?!"

"No... That's not it..."

Saijou slowly pointed at the area in front of the bus. Ikki and the rest of the passengers, who had made their way to the front after Touka, followed his trembling finger.

"Huh? Isn't that the way to the school?"

There, in the very direction of Hagun Academy, thick black smoke was rising into the blood-red evening sky. Everyone present was at a loss for words, their eyes wide open in terror. Everyone, of course, except for Nagi Alisuin, who alone had remained seated.



The bus transporting the group barreled through the main gate of Hagun Academy, its tires screeching to a halt. Everyone inside leaped out through both the door and the windows to take in the horrid scene.

"This is awful..."

Flames licked every part of the building, pouring smoke into the sky. The asphalt paved over the earth had cracked and broken, as if it had suffered an explosion. Scattered around the ruined school were collapsed students and faculty members who'd stayed for the summer. The fire was no mere accident; it was the result of a battle.

"Ikki, look!" Stella yelled, pointing.

Ikki turned to look in that direction, where he found two familiar women.

"Ms. Oreki... and Ayatsuji?!" Both of them lay motionless on the ground. Ikki and Stella rushed over to them and held them in their arms. "Ayatsuji! Wake up!"

"..."

"Nothing. Any luck, Stella?"

"Ms. Oreki's not moving either. She's not wounded, though; she just fainted." There were no wounds on either of the ladies, but their clothes had been sliced and frayed in some places. "Whoever took them down must have been using their Device in Phantom Form."

"Ladiies and gentlemeeen!"

"Wha—?!"

An impish voice suddenly echoed through the area. It had come from above, as Ikki and his friends discovered when they all looked up toward its source. On the roof of a burning building stood a tall, lean man dressed like a jester.

"Welcome home from your long journey, representative team of Hagun Academy! I've been waiting for you!"

“Is that a clown?!”

The man’s bizarre appearance baffled the group, but Ikki and Touka recognized him from the list of Seven Stars contestants.

“No, that’s...”

“You’re Reisen Hiraga from Bunkyo, aren’t you?” Touka asked, a menacing look on her face.

“Oh, you know me?” the jester responded, the excitement plain in his voice. “Heheheh, what an honor it is for the great Raikiri to remember my name! How do you like my stage? Did it shock you to your core?”

“Were you the one who did all this?!”

“Oh, no!” The fool exaggeratedly shook his head back and forth. “No, no, no, no, no! It wasn’t *I* who did this.”

The Pierrot, Reisen Hiraga, then jumped down from the roof of the building he stood on, from about forty feet in the air. He wasn’t the only one, either. From behind him, several more shadows descended, landing together in front of the Hagun students.

“Ah?!”

A man in a kimono carrying a long nodachi; an outlandish-looking woman, topless save for an artist’s apron; two girls riding a lion with raven-black fur, one with an eyepatch and the other wearing a maid uniform. Those four, as well as Hiraga and two others, comprised their off-kilter troupe. Even stranger than their appearances, though, was the mysterious, foreboding aura that accompanied them as they stood before Hagun’s students. Once they’d all landed, Hiraga gestured to himself and the others, finally answering Touka’s question.

“’Twas not I, but *we*, the students of Akatsuki Academy.”

The eighth school that had once moved in the shadows, Akatsuki had at last formally announced its existence. Its purpose: to stand in opposition to the schools that made up the Seven Stars, undermining the event like the dawn as it eclipsed the Big Dipper.

Ikki and his friends stood stock-still, unable to do anything but stare dumbfoundedly at the group. It was no surprise that they were stuck agape; the students were all representatives from schools other than Hagun. To make matters worse, looking upon the villains brought Ikki and Shizuku face-to-face with Ouma Kurogane, their own flesh and blood—though perhaps he had foregone being their older brother.

“Y-You! You’re that kid from Kyomon we met at the training camp!”

Among the seven who called themselves the students of Akatsuki Academy was Amane Shinomiya, the boy they’d met a few days ago.

“Ahaha, nice to see you again, Stella. You too, Ikki. I’m so glad I

get to see your faces again so soon.”

“This must be why you got that bad feeling, Ikki.”

Is that really it?

Though Stella, having finally understood the reason, reminded Ikki of his distaste for Amare, he couldn't help but wonder about her conclusion. Was the ill omen that had hung in his mind nothing more than a premonition that such an event would come to pass? No matter the answer, Ikki didn't have time to pursue the doubts that had surfaced within him. He had other, more pressing things to focus on, so he looked up and posed a question to the enemy most closely related to him:

“Kyomon, Rokuzon, Bunkiyoku, Bukiyoku... You've got representatives from every school but Hagun here. Why is that? What's going on here? Maybe you'd be willing to enlighten me with a reasonable explanation, *brother*. I've never heard of an Akatsuki—”

“Shut up.” Rather than an explanation, Ouma responded with a cruel retort, as if Ikki were a mere fly to be swatted away. “I renounced my relationship with you Kurogane scum long ago. Don't talk like you know me.”

Ouma refused to so much as glance at his siblings. His eyes remained focused on the woman standing next to Ikki, Stella Vermillion. The sheer weight of his glare told her everything she needed to know.

This guy... He's no joke. She could feel her skin tingling—trembling, even—just from the look in his eyes. Seven stood in front of her, all certainly ambitious and powerful knights, but the Gale Sword Emperor still stood out from amongst them. The air of intimidation about him was unmatched; his mere presence exuded pressure. *No doubt about it. This guy's the cream of the crop.*

The glare Stella returned Ouma housed more conviction the more the realization of his strength set in. The others were much the same, as the tension between the two small forces continued to grow. Eventually, despite the intense hostility, Hiraga offered a more palatable answer than the venomous one Ouma had given.

“So, why are we doing this? What is Akatsuki Academy? I understand your questions, boy, so allow me to answer them. It's actually pretty simple: whether or not we secure the representative spots at the Seven Stars, the management committee would never allow a school unapproved by the Federation to participate. Instead, we're going to force them to approve of us by showing the world that a competition to find the country's strongest student knights would be pointless if we were to be excluded.”

“I see. In other words, you're trying to destroy Hagun to accomplish that goal. You plan to take Hagun's place as one of the

seven schools taking part in the Festival.”

“Correct! You’re always so quick to catch on, Raikiri.”

“And you think they’ll be willing to accept that you’re doing something illegal?”

“The management committee isn’t stupid. They’ll just remove you from the Festival.”

That was wrong; before that could happen, the Japanese government would stop Akatsuki’s attacks. Though Touka and Saijou told him as much, Hiraga’s fearless grin never wavered.

“Heheh, not quite. Rest assured that we will appear at the Seven Stars. The management committee and its parent organization, the Mage-Knight Federation, have no choice but to approve of Akatsuki Academy.

“Come on, think about it. Once we’ve destroyed Hagun, a school with such a vibrant history, refusing our challenge would be the same as running away with their tail between their legs. The Mage-Knight Federation controls the education of Blazers in every country under its umbrella. They wouldn’t sit around and let a school outside their control produce students stronger than theirs. After all, society’s trust in them is on the line here.

“To take back their damaged trust, they can only prove that the Blazers they’ve created are stronger than ours. If they can’t, they’ll never be able to protect what they’ve spent more than half a century building: their monopoly on educating Blazers.”

Indeed, the Seven Stars wasn’t merely an event for the schools. It existed for the Federation to put the excellence of their educational facilities and the mass production of superior Blazers under their control on display for the entirety of Japan. Their ability to deliver such incredible results was the reason that an exception was made to allow Blazer education, a factor vital to Japan’s defense, to be left to the Mage-Knight Federation, an entity that existed outside of the Japanese government.

But what if there was another educational facility that could outdo the Federation? Naturally, trust in their brand would be shaken to its very core. The purpose behind the establishment of Akatsuki Academy and the hiring of Rebellion, an enemy of the Federation, was to do just that, create a powerful entity to oppose them.

“So, I’m terribly sorry, but I’m going to need you to fall. You will be the stepping stones that lead to our success.”

Great malice rose from the group of Akatsuki students, enveloping them as they took their Devices in hand and assumed fighting stances.

“Do you really think we’ll just lie down and let you make fools out of us? Come and *take* us down, if you think you can!”

Hagun's students responded in kind. They were still unnerved after the instantaneous show of hostility, but they materialized their own Devices nonetheless, symbolizing their readiness to resist the incoming threat.

"Heheh, with pleasure."

The tension finally boiled over, with both forces leaping into battle.



"Thank you so much for coming all the way out here, Master Nangou. We never expected that our swordplay coaches would be such easy opponents for him."

Back at Kyomon Academy's training camp in Yamagata, the facility had become quiet, the students having returned to their schools. Torajirou Nangou, the God of War and a swordplay instructor rushed in to help with the camp, was thanked for his help and seen to his car by a member of the camp's staff.

"Oh ho ho! It's no trouble at all. I'd been hoping to spar with that boy once or twice, and this was a perfect excuse to do so. Just as I'd thought, that boy is truly something."

"You think so?" the staff member asked, taken aback by Nangou's claim. "I went to watch one of your matches, but you two just stood and stared at each other the whole time. I didn't see so much as one swing from either of your swords, so I just assumed Ikki was afraid of you."

"Oh ho. Well, I suppose an amateur would see it that way."

Nangou had sparred with Ikki three times during his stint as a temporary swordplay coach. Each time, they stood in their starting positions, remaining motionless until the end of the match. To someone like the staff member, who had watched from the sidelines, Ikki being too scared to move was the most logical conclusion to have drawn. According to Nangou, however, the truth was deeper than that.

Stepping into range of a swordsman of Nangou's level was essentially accepting death; a single thoughtless misstep was all he needed to immediately cut down any foe. Knowing as much, the Worst One spent the entire duration of their three matches—a total of sixty minutes—making tiny alterations to his gaze, his fighting aura, and any other behaviors he could adjust in preparation to move in. He avoided making any thoughtless missteps, attempting to create an opportunity to jump in by standing in his starting position and using every technique in his repertoire in hopes of breaching the impenetrable barrier that was Nangou's sword.

Unfortunately for Ikki, he was up against the man whose title

was earned through his victory in China's God of War League, the most prestigious of knight leagues in all the world. A man like him would give Ikki no opportunity to approach, resulting in Ikki not making a single move. Despite that, however, Nangou thought very highly of the boy.

Quite a surprise that he forced me to keep my guard up the way he did. Maybe if we'd used our abilities, we could've actually finished our fights.

While it was true that Ikki hadn't moved at all, it was also true that Nangou hadn't either. The Worst One had, for the full hour they'd sparred, never given the God of War a single chance to attack him. Though Nangou had made alterations to his behaviors to attempt to intimidate Ikki or feign attacks, Ikki's spirit never wavered. He'd remained so steadfast, in fact, that he'd even gone on a similar offensive rather than remaining defensive. From the sidelines, it had appeared as though they'd stood still for twenty minutes at a time, but for Nangou, it was sixty minutes of incredibly dense combat the likes of which he'd experienced only a few times in the past.

"In terms of swordplay alone, he might be even superior to Ryouma," Nangou said, his wrinkled face relaxing into a pleasant smile. "That boy's going to be a frightening one someday."

"He must be a big deal if you've got this much to say about him."

"Oh ho. But I'm not going to let myself fall behind just yet.

Hmm?"

"Master? What's wrong?"

Nangou suddenly stopped walking, and the staff member walking with him stopped as well. Nangou was staring directly ahead, at a small hut built next to the road.

"What's this?"

"That's a warehouse. I believe lime and other similar materials are stored in it."

"Is that all?"

"I would assume so, yes."

"Well. That's strange, then," Nangou said as he scratched his chin, lost in thought.

"Why's that?"

"There's a person inside."

Nangou's brusque assertion prompted surprise from the staff member.

"Wh-What?! You don't mean..."

Not waiting for his response, Nangou's cane knocked against the ground with each step he took toward the warehouse. He paused, then, in a flash imperceptible to the untrained eye, unsheathed his swordstick Device, slicing the padlock that sealed the warehouse door.

When he opened it, he discovered a girl who had been bound and gagged.

“I knew it.”

“Mmph! Hmmmph!”

“Y-You’re that girl from Hagun Academy’s newspaper club!” the staff member, who had arrived right after Nangou, cried in shock. The confined girl was indeed none other than Kagami Kusakabe.

“Hrrrmph!”

“Don’t rush me. I’ll free you now.”

Nangou skillfully severed the rope that bound Kagami. With her freedom of movement regained, she tore away the gag that covered her mouth and took a deep breath.

“Pwah! Haah, haah! Th-Thank you for saving me!”

“What in blazes happened to you?”

The staff member’s face was colored with uneasiness at the abnormal state of things. She had obviously been bound up and locked in the warehouse, but the specifics of how she’d gotten into such a situation were completely unknown to him. Kagami, however, hurriedly shook her head.

“Haah, I’ll explain later! I have to make a phone call first!”

Communicating the truth she’d discovered and the traitor that had discovered her to her friends was of utmost importance. Driven by a duty-bound determination to warn Ikki and the others, she pulled her student handbook from her pocket.

“Grr!”

It’s not going through!

No matter which of the trio Kagami called, neither Ikki nor Stella nor Shizuku would pick up. Awful thoughts about what sort of situation they were in flooded her mind, accompanied by the image of her friends fallen at Alice’s feet. She knew just how terrifying Alice’s abilities were, as the two had spent plenty of time together. If, as she had deduced, Alice was a member of the enemy ranks, the image in her mind wasn’t unrealistic.

She had to find some way to tell them about Alice, and every second was precious. Nervousness continued to strengthen the pounding in Kagami’s chest, until she resorted to an extreme measure. She followed a set procedure as she operated her handbook’s display, switching on one of its emergency features. Only usable to connect two student handbooks from the same school, the “forced call” mode set the receiving phone to full volume and automatically answered the call on speakerphone. With the forced call mode activated, she called Ikki’s handbook once more.

“Ikki!” she screamed the moment her call connected. “Alice is a spy from another school! Watch ooout!”



Kagami's voice echoed across the distant campus of Hagun Academy at an incredible volume. It reached the ears of everyone present, but it was a moment too late. Her screams were heard in the same instant Akatsuki's and Hagun's forces charged into battle.

Standing at the back of Hagun's group, Alice, too, had made her move. She watched her so-called allies charge toward Akatsuki, then materialized several copies of her Device, Darkness Hermit, and held them between her fingers. It was the moment she had been waiting for, the type of moment she lived for.

Alice's ability to manipulate shadows was based on concept manipulation. Her Noble Art, Shadow Bind, was an incredibly potent action that prevented all of her opponent's movements if their shadow was pierced by her Device. Once the Hermit dug its fangs into one's shadow, they wouldn't be able to break their restraints no matter how hard they struggled. Even someone as strong as Stella would be powerless before it.

In situations where ambush was a viable tactic, Alice's ability was one of the strongest there was. All she had to do was create an opportunity for that ambush. To that end, she had entered Hagun Academy, getting closer to its most powerful students so nonchalantly and making them trust her. If she could get the opportunity to land just a single sucker punch, victory would be in her hands. That was her plan to make Akatsuki Academy's attack on Hagun, the Eve's Ceremony, a resounding success.

As of the moment the two groups began their clash, Alice had fulfilled her duty. She had admirably, flawlessly carried out her mission. The entirety of Hagun's forces had turned their backs to her, their minds and bodies focused wholly on the enemy they could see. Not a single person doubted her—a fatal mistake. Kagami could scream all she wanted, but she was powerless to help them evade or defend against their unseen foe.

“Shadow Bind.”

Coldly, mercilessly, the daggers flew from Alice's hands. They soared through the air, each one quickly piercing the shadow of one of her targets and activating her Noble Art. Frozen in place by the ambush, all of Akatsuki was left completely defenseless.



Ten minutes earlier, when Ikki and the gang had first seen smoke rising in the distance from aboard the bus.

“Akatsuki Academy. That's the name of the group attacking Hagun.”

Everyone had nearly erupted into panic, but Alice's cold, detached voice was clear among it all. Scattered around the bus were Darkness Hermit copies, stabbed into every shadow present.

"Huh?! Oh, Alice?!"

"What's going on?"

Looking over the group, all of whom were shaken from having suddenly been rooted in place, Alice spoke again.

"I'll tell you everything. Just calm down and listen, please." She told them all about her true identity: an assassin for the Rebellion. Hired by a certain organization, Rebellion aimed to interfere in the coming Seven Stars Battle Festival, and for that purpose, they had sent elites from the underworld to the already-existing seven schools. Furthermore, she told them of the threat that they would face in ten minutes' time, along with the attackers' plans. "In short, my role was to stand behind you all and make it so you were unable to fight. The strategy would be guaranteed to go off without a hitch that way. I enrolled in Hagun and got closer to all of you in order to do that."

"So you were lying to us this whole time?!"

"If this is some sort of joke, you'd better take it back."

Stella and Ikki looked confused—bitter, even—but Alice shook her head.

"Sorry, but it's no joke," she declared so assuredly that it made Stella and Ikki even angrier. "Everything I just told you is true."

"I don't get it," Shizuku, the person among them all who knew Alice the best, asserted, as calm and collected as ever. Her face, like the water's surface on a clear day, showed not a ripple of emotion. "Why are you telling us this? Doesn't us knowing about the plan make it that much more likely to fail?"

Shizuku had a point. After all, Alice had just told them all about the role she was to play once they'd arrived at Hagun. They knew that she was planning to ambush them from behind. If she meant to betray them, she was really jumping the gun.

Pressed from that angle, Alice looked over to Shizuku and responded in her calm voice. She had chosen the words she would say long ago.

"Yes, you're right. I want this strategy to fail."

Her tone, full of certainty, and her words, tinged with resolve, combined to show that she was, without a doubt, speaking the truth. She'd already made the decision to ensure that Akatsuki's plan ended in failure.

"Why? Didn't you enter this school and get close to Shizuku all for this?"

Though Ikki demanded to know why she would betray Akatsuki, Alice couldn't help but to crack a troubled smile.

“Yes. Or, well, that’s what I was supposed to do. The thing is, I just became so helplessly fond of Shizuku.”

Alice began thinking to herself as she stared at the silver-haired girl. A ruined family, unbreakable blood ties, constant injustice. Even in the face of all that, no matter how badly she got hurt or how much she lost, Shizuku gritted her teeth and fought through it. It didn’t matter if she couldn’t be the person who was closest to her beloved brother; she would still love him with all her heart. To Alice, who had folded before the world’s injustices and forever abandoned the ability to love others, Shizuku’s way of life was so very beautiful. It was for that reason that, at some point, Alice had begun to feel something more strongly than ever before.

“The strong take everything, and the weak lose everything.” Even if Wallenstein’s sad claim was the absolute truth of this hellish existence, she didn’t want to be in a position where she had to take from such a noble girl. If she did, she would be no different from the mafia that had taken everything from her.

“You might ask me why,” Alice continued, “but this really is the reason for everything I’ve done. I don’t want to destroy Shizuku’s hopes, nor the dreams of the one she cherishes so dearly. I won’t help anyone else do so, either. With that in mind, I want to work together with you all to protect the Seven Stars, the venue where you can make your dreams into reality.”

“You want to work together with us?”

“Yes. Akatsuki Academy is made up of the underworld’s elites, so trying to fight them fairly would be suicide. But, if I can guarantee an ambush, that would be your best chance to defeat them.” Being betrayed by an ally at the outset of battle would leave them completely unable to react. A spy having infiltrated Hagun guaranteed Akatsuki’s success, but that logic worked both ways. Thus, in order to ensure the ambush stood no chance of failure, Alice had spent all her time working as a member of Akatsuki, never making herself the least bit suspicious. “If Hagun can thoroughly crush Akatsuki here, their plans will suffer a total setback. They’ll be forced to flee and won’t even be able to participate in the Festival. Only then will I be able to protect your Seven Stars Battle Festival. So please, I need you to work with me so that we can drive Akatsuki back.”

Alice bowed her head as deeply as she could while she petitioned with her friends. Everything she was doing was for the sake of Shizuku, both the girl herself and the boy she loved. She held out no hope of things returning to the way they were as a result of a single good deed; it didn’t change the fact that she was a murderer and a liar. Never again would Shizuku think of Alice as a sister, just like the younger siblings she’d lost long ago.

That, however, no longer mattered to her. She didn't even care if she was no longer a part of Shizuku's life if it meant protecting Shizuku's precious love. That was Alice's one desire—her genuine aspiration. And yet...

"D-Do you expect us to believe that?! Rebellion is a terrorist group, right?! They're all murderers!"

"That's right! You even said that you've killed people yourself! Why should we trust you when you've got us bound like this?!"

How sad it was that humans had no way to read the minds of others. The way the Hagure twins felt was only natural, considering how little they knew Alice. Their expressions were filled with fear and hatred toward the murderer before them, an abnormality existing outside the realm of common values.

For such a long time, a killer had been in their midst. It was so disgusting, so vile, so frightening that their reactions were what Alice had expected. To find that one of their acquaintances was actually a murderer with dozens of kills to their name must have been terrifying. All the times they'd spoken so obliviously to the monster before them metamorphosed, making such an everyday occurrence something feel so repulsive that it made them want to vomit. Alice's only targets were fellow underworld criminals, but murder is still murder. From all points of view, their reactions were normal.

"Kikyou, Botan, I think you're exactly right. There's no reason for you to trust a murderer like me, especially now that you know I've been a traitor this whole time. That's why, once this is over, I swear that I'll never show my face around you again. And if something happens to me in this fight, if I'm injured in some way, I won't mind if you desert me. But please, just for this moment, I want you to trust me."

Accepting that their assertion was the natural conclusion, Alice used it to further her request. All she could do was plead with them, because She knew that there was no way to make others understand the contents of her heart, so all she could do was plead with them. The only option she had left was to pour every ounce of sincerity she could muster into her words and bow.

"Something's been on my mind," Touka interjected. "The organization that hired Rebellion to destroy the Seven Stars—in other words, your sponsor. Who exactly is that?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Why not?"

"Because it's a foe that we can't handle. Telling you would only stress you out, so I can't tell you just yet."

"C-Come on, she's obviously hiding something!"

"I knew it! We can't trust someone this suspicious!"

The Hagure twins let loose another round of jeers, but Touka stopped them.

“And if we told you that we won’t trust you? What would you do then?”

“If that’s the case, I’ll turn this bus around and drive it as far away as I can,” Alice replied unhesitatingly. She had always planned to do so as a last resort. “But escape is impossible, so it would be little more than a vain struggle. As for me, I’d much prefer to make use of the element of surprise that we have now.”

“Hmm. I see your point. What do you think we should do, Kurogane?” The student council president’s dignified nature was shining through. Instead of panicking when faced with such an extraordinary situation, she quickly gathered her thoughts and took control over the flow of conversation. “Whether we fight or run, and whether we trust Alice or not, we’re in a race against time. This isn’t the time for a deliberate exchange of opinions. You’re the captain of Hagun’s Seven Stars representatives, so I believe you’re the one most qualified to make this decision.”

Ikki remained silent, considering his options. At the moment, there wasn’t enough basis to place their full trust in Alice. As Shizuku had pointed out, however, it was true that Alice’s actions did nothing to benefit her side. Ikki continued to turn the problem over in his mind, but a single quick glance at Shizuku’s face was enough to give him his answer.

“I think we should trust her.”



Thanks to the Hagun representatives’ trust, Alice’s plan was carried out flawlessly. All of Akatsuki Academy was seized by their shadows during the initial charge, leaving them defenseless and unable to move.

“Raaahhhhh!”

All seven of them were slaughtered by Hagun’s blades. Fatal blows on defenseless targets, unavoidable and unblockable. It was a complete, unquestionable victory for Hagun Academy.

That should do it.

Alice had protected Shizuku’s—her little sister’s hopes. Her and everyone else’s Seven Stars was no longer in danger of being soiled by foul machinations. She was overjoyed beyond words by the result, and the other Hagun students were much alike.

“Ph-Phew... I don’t know what I would’ve done if we’d been stabbed in the back.”

Feeling their blades pierce through the Akatsuki students put everyone’s minds at ease. They all sighed with relief, finally relaxing

their shoulders. Everyone except for Ikki, however, who was looking down at his fallen brother with a grim expression on his face.

It can't be. A horrid chill that nearly made him retch ran through his body as he looked upon the truth that lay before him. *What is this?*

No matter how or from where he looked at it, he was truly looking at his brother Ouma. His manner, his aura, his spirit, his voice, his face—all of it was Ouma's and Ouma's alone. Ikki could still feel within Intetsu that he had absolutely taken down his brother with just one blow, yet that fact, coupled with the fact that he was dealing with the genuine article, made it all the harder to believe. Ouma Kurogane, the Gale Sword Emperor, couldn't possibly have fallen so gracelessly at his feet.

As if triggered by that realization, a memory resurfaced in Ikki's mind. A single fragment of a memory from several days prior, back in Yamagata's shopping district. On that day, one boy had moved even faster than him to stop a knifer.

"Whooooa! Stop, stop! You can't do that!"

That boy had told Ikki that he was able to do so because of his Blazer ability. Taking the boy's physical ability into account, he must have acted even before the man did; if he hadn't, Ikki would have reached him first.

Generally speaking, only two abilities could make such a thing possible. The first was the ability to see through things. If he had seen the hidden knife, it would have been easy to jump in before the man had revealed its presence. There was something that contradicted that, though. Kagami had said that the reason this boy was chosen to represent his school at the Seven Stars was that he had "the rare ability to manipulate cause and effect". The ability to see through things was neither rare nor related to cause and effect, meaning that his Blazer ability had to have been something else. That something else, the only other possibility, was the ability to predict the future.

There's no way...!

Faced with an impossible reality, Ikki seemingly received a divine revelation, one that sent a shudder creeping from his bowels all the way up to his throat. He quickly turned toward Alice, the shudder bursting from his lips as words.

"Alice, watch out! It's a trap!"

But he was too late.

"Wha—?! Ah..."

"Alice?!"

Before she could react to Ikki's warning, Alice was skewered by countless blades from behind. She then fell to the ground with a thud, dozens of silver swords still stabbed into her. Everyone gasped simultaneously at the sudden development.

“What a shame!” came a boundlessly energetic voice. “Maybe she would’ve reacted in time if you’d noticed a little sooner. I’m surprised you figured out my ability with so little contact, though, Ikki. That’s just what I’d expect from you!”

There, behind Alice, stood Amane Shinomiya, smiling innocently as he grasped countless silver swords.



Alice, forcibly blacked out by the Phantom Form weapons protruding from her back, collapsed limply upon the ground. Shizuku was the first to act in retaliation.

“Alice!” she yelled, running over to her fallen friend.

“Shizuku, don’t be careless! Look ahead!”

“Gh?!”

Ikki’s warning came just in time. Before Shizuku’s eyes, there was a small distortion in the empty air, where the scenery seemed to rip.

That’s...!

Upon seeing it, Shizuku held up both arms in front of her face, assuming a defensive posture. Instantly after doing so, her tiny body was launched horizontally through the air, bouncing like a ball. It was like she’d been punched away by some invisible force—which was exactly what had happened.

“Ah...!”

A gasp came from one of the Hagun students. No, perhaps it had come from all of them, as the sight before them was truly stunning. As if walking out of an invisible smokescreen, the fallen Akatsuki Academy students appeared before the group, unwounded.

“H-Huh?! The heck’s going on?!”

“Are those clones?! How can they be standing over there when they’re on the ground right here!”

Renren and Saijou looked at their feet to confirm that the fallen Akatsuki were still there. Upon doing so, their eyes opened wide, for the truth was that the figures below them were nothing more than painted wooden dolls.

“Wh-What’s going on here?!”

“That was my *Trompe L’oeil*. Some say my art is realer than the real thing.”

A girl from Akatsuki Academy muttered a response to Renren’s shout. That girl, topless besides the apron hiding her generous chest, was Sara Bloodlily. Much like Alice, she, the Bloody da Vinci, was a member of Rebellion.

“To put it simply, the people that you thought to be us were actually wooden replicas given life by her Noble Art and piloted by my Black Widow.” Hiraga, the Pierrot, laughed contentedly as he

exposed the truth. "Using Ouma's wind powers to refract light, we kept our true selves hidden the whole time, waiting for your plan to fall apart."

"Then you've known all along that Alice was deceiving you?!"

"We happen to have a spectacular prophet among us, you see. Ah, but the traitor herself was never told of this, of course. Just look how it turned out, though; it would seem Amame's prediction was right on the nose. Makes for quite the shame that Master Wallenstein wanted to take pity on Alice and give her one last chance. I imagine he'll be very disappointed."

"Well, I'll leave you to finish the job, friends. The sponsor's order was to 'crush them as absolutely and intimidatingly as possible', so if you would, please destroy every last one of them. In the meantime, I'll take this traitor to her master."

The Pierrot lifted Alice's limp body and leaped backward like a panther, fleeing the battlefield. Try as he might, however, Ikki would not allow him such an easy escape.

"Hold it!" he cried as he kicked off the ground in pursuit. He moved fast enough that he would have caught up quickly if it weren't for the Gale Sword Emperor blocking his path. "Ouma!"

"Begone."

With not the slightest moment of hesitation, Ouma swung his Device, a nodachi over three feet long called Ryuzume, a silver arc following the blade as it tore through the air. The merciless attack rushed toward Ikki's torso, making it all too clear to him that he would have to stop and pay full attention to defending himself to prevent himself and Intetsu from being sliced in two.

"Haaaaah!"

Though Ikki had temporarily given up his pursuit, Ouma's Device was stopped short of its target by a golden sword enveloped in flames.

"Stella!"

"Ikki!" Stella shouted while still fending off Ouma's blade with her own. "Shizuku is chasing after Alice!"

"Ah!"

Ikki turned to look at the spot where Shizuku had landed after being blown away by Ouma. She was no longer there, so he began searching for her, and eventually caught sight of her far away, pursuing the fleeing Hiraga at top speed.

"They didn't even try to stop her! There's probably a trap just waiting for her out there! Don't let her go alone; you have to go after them!"

Stella's rapid-fire commands caused Ikki to hesitate. Was it okay for him to leave Stella and the others to deal with the threat facing them? Fortunately, Touka and the other student council members

were present. The Hagure sisters were Seven Stars representatives, too. Therefore, it was best to help the person who was alone.

“Got it! I’ll let you handle these guys, then!”

“Right! I can crush every last one of these fools even without Alice’s help!”

Spurred on by Stella’s confidence, Ikki left the fight behind to chase after Shizuku. Seeing him off as he left, Stella returned her attention to her foe, who resembled her beloved. She could feel that the man, just like the puppet from earlier, was staring into her soul.

“I know you’ve been watching me this whole time. You’re here because you want to fight me, aren’t you?!” If Sara’s art was “realer than the real thing” like she claimed, then the puppet’s gaze had even imitated Ouma’s emotions. The Crimson Princess had no reason to refuse him. Her opponent was a Rank A knight just like her, so the time to play her part had come. “Then I accept your challenge, Gale Sword Emperor!”

Resolved to fight, Stella used her raw power to send Ouma flying. After launching him over a hundred feet away, she poured all of her spirit into the broadsword Lævateinn. She would begin their fight with her ultimate Noble Art, a swing of her sword that burned with the heat of the sun itself: Katharterio Salamandra.

I don’t know how strong this guy is, but I do know that he means business!

In order to defeat him, she couldn’t hold anything back at any point during their fight. If opening with Katharterio Salamandra was all it took to finish the match, that was fine with her. If not, she would learn her enemy’s true strength through how he countered. That was Stella’s decision, her determination leaping like the temperature.

“Hmph. Is that really how you intend to end this? Boring.”

With a savage grin that revealed his canines, Ouma responded with his own most powerful Noble Art. Ironically, it involved the same movements as Stella’s. Gripping his long sword with both hands, he held it aloft as he poured magic into it.

As the Gale Sword Emperor, Ouma’s ability was the manipulation of nature, specifically wind. The savage gale born from his power created a tornado centered around Ryuuzume, devouring the air around him. Likewise, debris and fire were swallowed by the storm that consumed everything in its wake. Once the violent storm had grown and condensed around his sword to the point that it too seemed to have mass, Ouma coolly uttered a single word:

“Kusanagi.”



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A sword of blinding flame versus a sword of raging wind. Each one was nearly two hundred feet in length, able to attack at an unprecedented range. They were more than capable of bridging the hundred-foot gap between their wielders.

Both warriors simultaneously swung their supermassive swords down on their waiting foe, the blades colliding in midair. Instantly, the reinforced elements summoned by the knights' magic, flame and wind, began to grind each other away, sending sparks flying. The sparks quickly began to unravel, becoming storms and conflagrations of their own that continued to wreak havoc on the surrounding area as they battled.

"Eeeeeek!"

The Hagures screamed as the scorching gales threatened to blow away everyone present. Forced to protect themselves with magic, they all curled up and labored to stay rooted in place. If they relaxed for even a second, they would be launched with such force that the inevitable impact would be akin to hitting the ground after falling from the top of a skyscraper. To avoid that, everyone desperately tried to protect themselves while in the midst of a fight at a level that most normal knights could only dream of witnessing.

At long last, however, the competition between the blinding flame and raging wind began to break down. The Crimson Princess was being forced back.

N-No way! The bones in Stella's arms creaked. Her heels gradually dug into the asphalt beneath them, carving fissures into it. Though she prided herself on her unprecedented strength, she was under pressure she had never faced before. *I'm actually losing in a battle of raw strength?!*

The sheer power that Ouma was unleashing bewildered Stella; she had never experienced anything like it. Unable to keep up, her plan to use Katharterio Salamandra to ascertain her opponent's strength began to collapse at an alarming rate. Never before had she come across so much as a single person who could withstand a frontal attack from her esteemed Noble Art, but Ouma had done just that, and was even pushing her back.

Stella could hardly believe her eyes, let alone measure his strength. She had no experience facing such a situation, and with that lack of experience came a lack of ideas as to how to recover.

I don't know what to do...! Slowly, gradually, the perfect cross shape created by the blades distorted. Raging wind overcame blinding flame, the tornado grinding away at the light pillar like a drill. Finally, the blade of Katharterio Salamandra was severed, and Kusanagi descended toward Stella's head. *Oh no!*

Reeling from the overpowering force that broke her sword, Stella

couldn't move to escape her opponent's attack. Nobody was able to jump in to save her, either, as everyone else in the area was preoccupied with protecting themselves from the incredible impact of the Rank A knights' swords. Stella was going to be hit. Her defeat was all but assured—if not for Touka Toudou, the Raikiri and the only person present who was able to withstand their battle.

“Stella!”

Just before Kusanagi could split Stella in half, Touka used Shippuu Jinrai to accelerate, slipping between them to grab Stella and save her from the falling blade by a hair's breadth. Kusanagi slammed into the ground as its raging winds tore through and blew away everything in its path. If Stella hadn't been pulled away by Touka, she herself would have fallen victim to that destructive power.

Nothing remained in the arc traced by Kusanagi's descent. Buildings, training grounds, the asphalt along the ground, and even the debris that littered the area had been ground away, leaving only a straight line carved into the brown soil. It was almost as if an enormous dragon had dragged one of its claws through it all. If a human had taken that powerful a blow head-on, there would probably have been nothing left of them.

Th-That was close! If Touka hadn't saved me, I would have...

“Thank you! You saved me, Tou—?!” Suddenly, Stella's voice caught in her throat, the reason for which lay in Touka's right hand as it supported Stella's head. She had sent a bolt of electricity directly through Stella's brain. “Why...?”

“I'm sorry, Stella, but I can't let you keep fighting Ouma. If you can only tie with me, then you can't defeat him right now.”

“Ah...”

Stella looked to have some sort of protest in mind, but given that Touka had essentially flipped the breaker in her brain, she fainted before she could say it.

“Kikyou, Botan!”

“Huh?! ”

“Eep!”

After forcing Stella to go unconscious, Touka looked to the Hagure sisters and lobbed Stella's limp body at them. Though startled by the abrupt toss, the girls were quick enough thinkers to make it as two of Hagun's Seven Stars representatives, so they had no trouble catching Stella.

“Take her and run as far as you possibly can!” Touka shouted not a moment after they'd caught her. “We can't lose any Seven Stars representatives like you girls right now!”

Even under such extreme circumstances, Touka was calmer and more collected than anyone else. The situation had transformed the

moment their ambush failed, and considering the difference in strength between the two groups, driving Akatsuki Academy back was a herculean task for Hagun. If they jumped in without a plan, Stella and the Hagure sisters ran the risk of becoming disabled—or worse—at the hands of Akatsuki’s students. If that happened, Akatsuki taking Hagun’s place as the seventh school, the worst possible outcome, would become far less improbable. As a veteran who had been through countless real-life battles, Touka decided on the best course of action and relayed her plan accordingly.

Routing Akatsuki’s students and bringing the situation to a forceful end. Stella’s method would usually be the best way to do things, but it’s not the right strategy here. Right here, right now, the most important thing for me to do is to protect Hagun Academy’s representatives!

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” the twins cried.

Touka’s command reverberated with the strength of her resolve, spurring them into action. Regardless of whether they agreed with her, the force of her command alone was enough to make them listen. Kikyō, the stronger of the Hagure sisters, quickly picked Stella up, and they turned tail and fled from Hagun.

“You think you can escape?”

Ouma’s voice, like a low growl, signaled the Akatsuki students behind him to leap into action. First was the girl in the dress, the Beast Tamer Rinna Kazamatsuri, riding atop her enormous black lion. Following her was Yui Tatara, The Unflinching.

“Mach Greed!”

“Crescendo Axe!”

Though Rinna and Yui tried to give chase to the three, Runner’s High and the Destroyer halted their pursuit by attacking them from the side.

“And you think we’d let you follow them?” Touka retorted, locking eyes with Ouma as she readied Narukami. As if following her, the other student council members readied their Devices anew as well.

“You’d sacrifice yourselves to let your representatives get away? That’s quite the level-headed decision. Unfortunately, you’re only prolonging the inevitable.”

Accompanying Ouma’s threat, the Akatsuki students stepped forward, their dark malice palpable. A second charge, one that harbored no falsehood or tricks, was unavoidable. It was truly a matter of life and death.

“Kana.”

As the atmosphere rapidly tensed ever further, Touka spoke to the girl standing next to her: Kanata Toutokubara. Touka gazed at her, the student council’s only Seven Stars representative, seemingly encouraging her to flee. Aware of what she wanted to say, Kanata

offered not even a glance in return. She continued to stare fixedly at the targets in front of her.

“Absolutely not. I’ll be with you until the very end, Touka.”

“Right.” The two had known each other since they were children, so Touka knew just how stubborn she was. Repeated pleas would have been nothing more than wasted breath. “Letting a job go unfinished would leave a stain on the good name of the Hagun Academy student council. We’ll pay them back in full for trespassing on our turf!”

“Yeaahh!”

Invigorated by her short speech, all the students still present roared as they charged into battle.





“Haah, haah...!”

Shizuku had been running along the empty slope leading from the school for some time. Once she had made it out of a bustling downtown area, however, a sharp pain in her side forced her to stop.

I’m really... out of shape. But I haven’t lost him yet.

She cursed her own weakness as she calculated the distance between her and the clown who’d abducted Alice, Hiraga. He was no longer visible; at some point along the way, he might have gotten into a car. Forward thinker that she was, though, Shizuku had wrapped a thread of magic around Alice just as she was being abducted.

The thread, so thin that it was imperceptible to the naked eye, could pass through any material, leading directly to Alice. By using that thread as a guide, she would be able to find her lost friend, even if catching up on foot was impossible. To account for that impossibility, she accosted a man on a motorcycle who was waiting at a red light.

“Excuse me! I’m a student knight from Hagun Academy. There’s a bit of an emergency, so I’d like to borrow your bike—”

“What?! Get real, brat. Why would I do that?”

“This is an emergency,” she told the man, an alarmingly hostile look on her face as she pressed Yoishigure against his throat. “Please.”

“Gladly! In fact, I insist!”

With a horrified smile, the man nodded like a bobblehead before breaking into a dead sprint, leaving his motorcycle abandoned. He had left Shizuku no other choice; she was in too great a hurry to argue. Deciding that she could probably have the school return it later, Shizuku took the man’s spot on the bike. In doing so, she realized that she had made a grave mistake.

My legs are too short...

“This is truly the most dastardly trap of them all.”

“Having fun, Shizuku?” came a voice from behind her, causing her to turn around.

“Big Brother.” There stood Ikki, who had been quick to catch up to her. “The enemy must have had some sort of getaway vehicle prepared, because Alice is getting farther away. That’s why I procured this motorcycle, but as you can see, it has a major design flaw. It’s disappointing indeed to see just how far Japanese manufacturing has degraded.”

“I don’t think the problem here is the design.” Ikki chuckled for a moment at Shizuku’s blame-shifting, but his face quickly turned serious. He approached her and asked a question of the girl who was still trying to pursue Alice despite her trickery. “Shizuku. They know

that we're trying to find Alice, but Ouma and the others aren't trying to stop us. They're not trying because they don't have to try. There's no question that somewhere up ahead, someone we have no hope of defeating is lying in wait. You know that, right?"

"Yes, I'm well aware."

"Alice was lying to us for all that time. What if us pursuing her is all part of her plan? What if this is just another one of her complex schemes? That's not impossible, is it?"

"Yes, I'm well aware."

"And even if Alice *did* forsake Akatsuki just to save us, she told us to abandon her. That was what she asked of us. That means she doesn't want you to put yourself in danger, doesn't it?"

"Yes, I'm well aware."

Shizuku gave the same response to all three of Ikki's questions. She could infer that Ikki was trying to stop her, but she had no intention of backing down so easily, even if the person opposing her was her beloved older brother. After all, in her mind, his three questions were nothing but three tiny little nitpicks.

"So what? What's so important about any of that, Big Brother?" She looked her brother directly in the eye and conveyed to him just how determined she was. "Alice is my friend. She's the first person other than you that I've ever come to honestly enjoy. And now, that friend is in danger. That's all that matters to me right now. I don't care what threats I have to face or how much Alice wants me not to do this; I'm going to save her life."

She would not turn tail and run home. Even knowing all the risks involved, she still wanted to rush to her closest friend's aid. In the face of such courage and conviction, her brother couldn't help but crack a small grin.

"Good answer."

"...Bwah?" Ikki's unexpected response caused Shizuku to accidentally make a silly noise. "Big Brother, you're not here to try to stop me?"

"Well, if you'd given me a halfhearted answer, I would've dragged you home whether you liked it or not. But if that's how strongly you feel about it, I have no reason to stop you." Ikki straddled the motorcycle, pushing Shizuku behind him and gripping the handles. Then, he turned to look over his shoulder at her. "I'm here to help you do what you want to do, Shizuku."

"Big Brother..."

Ikki swore that he would join her, accepting all the perils that would come with doing so. The love and appreciation she felt for his compassion made her heart swell. She rested her head on his back and felt more than ever: *Though it may be unrequited, I'm glad I fell in love*

with you.

“Thank you,” Shizuku said, her voice quivering slightly.

“No need to thank me. This is what brothers do. Now, let’s get going. I’ll need you to give directions.”

“Okay.”

Ikki and Shizuku then rode straight toward Akatsuki Academy, where Alice had been whisked away to.

HAGUN ACADEMY BULLETIN

CHARACTER TOPICS

COPYEDITING: KAGAMI KUSAKABE

KURONO SHINGUUJI

■PROFILE

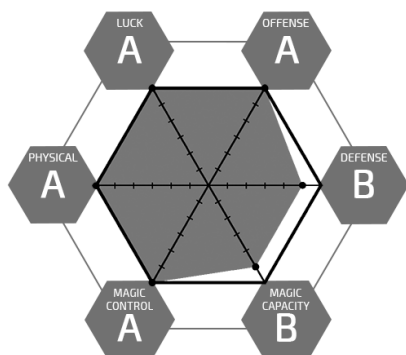
AFFILIATION: HAGUN ACADEMY

BLAZER RANK: A

NOBLE ART: FORBIDDEN ART:
WORLD CRISIS

NICKNAME: WORLD CLOCK

SUMMARY: DIRECTOR OF
HAGUN ACADEMY



KAGAMIN CHECK!

Last but not least is the school's director, Mrs. Kurono Shinguuji, aka World Clock. Her Device consists of two pistols, and her ability manipulates cause and effect to control time. Her Noble Art, World Crisis, collapses a part of space-time—there's still talk about the time she used it to stop Hadou Tensei at the Seven Stars finals!

What World Crisis destroys can't be fixed, though, so it was added to the list of Forbidden Arts. She was a KOK A-League fighter and the third-strongest knight in the world when she gave up knighthood for motherhood. People complained, but I think it was a good decision.

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Smoke billowed from Hagun Academy. Its campus was embroiled in the war between the school's student council and the students of Akatsuki Academy, and in the eyes of the student council, the outlook of that war was getting bleaker by the minute.

Even excluding the student guest Ouma Kurogane, every Akatsuki Academy student was a powerful fighter with deep ties to the underbelly of society. They all stood out amongst the underworld's ranks, having been hand-picked from the myriad of people who had been witness to terror and bloodshed unimaginable to everyday members of society. Each one of them was strong enough to match the ace of their school, and at least on par with any of the top eight student knights from across the country. It was that difference in strength had driven Touka and her companions into a corner.

"Argh!"

Runner's High Renren Tomaru, one of the student council members, cried out in pain in the midst of her high-speed dash. Her Noble Art, Mach Greed, canceled out any sources of deceleration, allowing her to accumulate more and more velocity. Boasting no more than a handful of failures in battle, she'd left every person she'd battled—save for one—in the dust upon reaching top speed.

"There's no point, weaklings!" Despite her high success rate, her opponent was hot on the heels of her high-acceleration Mach Greed. The reason for that was, of course, because her opponent was not a person, but a massive black lion. It was no mere lion, either. On top of its incredible physical strength that was incomparable to a human's, it also used mana emission to propel itself to a speed that approached even Renren's. "My loyal servant, Sphinx, is so much more than a mere magical beast. Thanks to the wicked stigmata carved into both my blood and soul by a demonic curse, I can use the power of my bloodline to draw out its dormant, dark power to the fullest extent. Mere mortals can only tremble before our strength!"

"What my master means to say is the following: 'Any living creature that wears my Collar of Subjugation becomes my Device. Lions have much greater brute strength than humans, so if it's able to use magic as well, it becomes even stronger!'"

The eyepatch-wearing girl on the lion's back, Beast Tamer Rinna Kazamatsuri, spoke in a bizarrely theatrical way. Her maid, Charlotte, then translated the intended meaning of her pomp.

"Now, accept your extinction, weakling!"

"What my master means to say is the following: 'Moving will only make this hurt more, so stay put!'"

"You're a bunch of weirdos!" Renren shouted an insult at the two in response to their jarringly silly back-and-forth.

There was no way she'd stop just because they told her to. Considering that the black lion was likely the weight of a small truck, letting it catch up to her meant certain death. What made it all the more problematic was that it would be nigh-impossible to stick to a hit-and-run fighting style with how well it matched her speed.

That's it! The sight of a light pole just ahead of her gave Renren an idea. If I'm up against a fast enemy, I'll use their speed to my advantage and feed them a counter! That way, I can end this with one punch!

Her foe was staying behind her while matching her speed. In that case, she would do the same thing that Ikki had done to her and use its speed to strike it that much harder. With that determination, Renren ran by the pole, grabbing on to it with her left arm to perform an instant U-turn.

The instant reversal in her velocity sent Renren careening straight toward the lion in pursuit of her, with Renren aiming for its vulnerable brow. Her abrupt U-turn that led into a counter would leave no time for it to evade, and unlike people, animals couldn't take defensive stances.

"Black Bird!"

She lunged forward, ready to settle their battle in the blink of an eye. However, her all-in ambush was met with boisterous laughter from the Beast Tamer.

"Haaahahaha! Unenlightened fools like you fail to see the truth governing this world! Did you not hear my venerable voice?! My demonic curse is not limited to the power to control magical beasts! Come, Sphinx, and show them the dark power that lies dormant within your tainted soul! Make them cower in fear before King's Pressure!"

"Rooooooar!"

The lion's eyes suddenly began burning with red flames, and Renren felt the force of a roar that would startle people miles away. Then, an unusual change occurred within her.

"Wha—?!"

I can't move!

Somehow, her body had stiffened, unable to move from the

position she was in. She had no time to wonder what had caused it, though, as the small truck of a beast slammed into her frozen body at full speed, sending her flying.

“Gah!”

Renren was launched dozens of yards away, her small body bouncing across the earth until she slammed into a concrete wall. By the time she fell to the ground, she had already blacked out.

“As I said, my demonic curse draws forth the powers of darkness! The power dormant within Fenr—I mean, Sphinx, is the dark King’s Pressure! Only the king of the beasts can wield the immense power required to make any enemy who locks eyes with him freeze and cower in fear!”

“What my master means to say, with a very proud look on her face, is the following: ‘Because I’ve made him my Device, he can use both magic *and* Noble Arts! Cool, right?!’”

“Tomaru!”

Seeing in her periphery that Renren had fallen, Touka bit her lip. It wasn’t just Renren who had been taken down, though.

Saijou, Uta, and even Kana, too!

The two groups had been fighting for just over ten minutes. At the end of those ten minutes, Touka was the last member of Hagun’s student council who remained standing.

“Ready to give up?” Ouma asked, exasperated, as despair clouded Touka’s face.

Unlike her companions, she wasn’t wounded in the slightest, but that wasn’t because she and Ouma were evenly matched. Once Stella and the others had escaped, Touka took each student council member’s strength into consideration and, deciding that she was the only one who could face him, chose to challenge Ouma herself. Shockingly, he’d responded to her challenge by dematerializing Ryuuzume, leaving him defenseless.

“I’m not one to point a sword at a woman weaker than me,” he’d told her. *“If you want to fight me that badly, I’ll let you have the first hit. If you can manage to wound me in any way, then I’ll face you in battle.”*

Ouma had then waited motionlessly with his arms crossed and his eyes closed, as if saying that a knight as weak as her wasn’t worth wasting his time on. Seeing him like that had infuriated Touka, but his arrogance in underestimating her had lent itself to providing a rare opportunity. There was no question that he was tremendously strong, as shown by how easily he had overpowered Stella, yet he had carelessly opened himself up to attack when faced with a drawn sword.

An opportunity like that wasn’t something she was going to let slip. She was going to remove Ouma—the most troublesome factor—

from the equation, and had wasted no time in taking advantage of his carelessness to do so. It was possible that she had misinterpreted his arrogance, that he'd known that she had only a fraction of his strength, but nonetheless, she had unleashed a full-power Raikiri against him. The draw from the sheath, the angle of the attack, the speed of the swing, and the power behind it were all immaculate—it was a perfectly executed strike.

She'd landed a direct hit with her Raikiri, yet it hadn't left even a single scratch on Ouma's body. For the full ten minutes that followed, she'd tried over and over, each attempt ending the same way. Every last slash had reverberated violently off of him as though she were bludgeoning a mountain rather than a man. The best she'd done was cut into his clothing; she'd never managed to pierce his skin.

What?! His defensive power is out of this world! Altogether, one Blazer being unable to hit another wasn't an incredibly rare phenomenon. Much like what had happened during Ikki and Stella's first fight, it was often due to the two knights doing battle having vastly different magic capacities. But the difference in our magic capacities shouldn't be that high!

"The way you and I have trained is very different," Ouma said as if witnessing the conflict taking place in her mind. "Accept that you have no chance against me."

"Tch! I'm not done yet!"

Touka dashed at Ouma. All of her allies had fallen, which meant the other Akatsuki students would be on their way to take her down as well, putting her directly in harm's way. To avoid the coming danger, she needed to land just one hit.

I'll get him while he's still mocking me!

Touka stepped back to create some distance between them and pointed the tip of Narukami at Ouma, holding the sword parallel to the ground. She formed a magnetic field in front of her using her magic, at the same time using Shippuu Jinrai to send electricity flowing through her muscles.

"Takemikazuchi!"

She plunged into the tunnel of electromagnetic forces, which propelled her forward with destructive speed. It was as if she had created a railgun that fired her own body as a projectile. The technique was incomplete, pregnable, and excessively dangerous. It was a flashy special attack that warranted no real practical use, but its destructive potential surpassed that of even Raikiri and its incredible propulsion.

Making use of that monstrous offensive power, Touka had taken up her final attack stance and charged, sending blood flying through the air. The red mist hadn't come from Ouma, however; it was coming

from Touka's right arm, thrust forward to attack. Narukami had only chiseled a fraction of an inch into Ouma's skin, just enough to let out a tiny bit of blood. He had remained completely motionless like a mountain, otherwise unaffected by Takemikazuchi's charge.

"What even... are you...?" Touka asked with a quivering voice, her right arm broken and limp. "Wha—?!"

Her eyes opened wide in shock, but not because Ouma had shrugged off her attack. It was because she had seen the countless scars that littered his chest, which she had poked using Takemikazuchi. Incisions, lacerations, punctures, bullet wounds, crush injuries—any and all kinds of pain had been inflicted on Ouma's body frequently enough that the wounds layered and overlapped, never able to heal.

iPS Capsules were advanced enough that they could heal the majority of wounds without leaving scars. Their existence was a medical miracle that made it very strange for a Blazer to have as many old wounds as he did—a bit too strange, even. For the first time, Touka had come to fear Ouma Kurogane from the depths of her heart.

"Wh-What in the world have you been doing since you disappeared?!"

Five years had passed since Ouma had left the spotlight. What kinds of horrors had he witnessed during that time?

"I'm not one to talk at length about myself." Shaking his head, he remained silent about the past five years of his life. "In fact, I have nothing to tell you. My parents, my brother, my sister, my fame—I threw it all away. All I have now is this sword and the vow I entrusted to it."

He then materialized Ryuuzume.

"Gh...!"

"Though small, this is indeed a wound. As promised, I'll fight you." In no time at all, a gust of raging wind had enveloped the two, with Ryuuzume at the center. "Kusanagi."

Just as it had done when it was used to fight off Stella's Katharterio Salamandra, the tornado sword descended upon Touka. The electrical overload in her body left by Takemikazuchi was making her convulse uncontrollably, leaving her helpless to act, let alone sidestep the attack.

I'm sorry, everyone...

The dragon's claw, cloaked in wind, mercilessly dragged Touka into the darkness.



After putting Hagun's student council to rout, one member of Akatsuki, Amane Shinomiya, sighed and looked up. The sun was

setting, allowing indigo to seep into the orange sky.

"Phew," he sighed. "That took a lot longer than I expected."

"Geh heh heh. That's because you idiots keep standing around and wasting time. I had mine done in seconds, too," Tatara complained hoarsely as she dragged her chainsaw Device along the ground.

"Heheheh. Boasting about receiving fortune's favor is quite impudent for one such as The Unflinching."

"What my master means to say is the following: 'Get your head out of your ass. Your matchup just happened to be against an easy target.'"

"That so? How about we check my 'matchup' with you, huh?"

"An amusing proposal!" Smirking at Tatara's challenge, Kazamatsuri slipped a finger under the eyepatch that covered her right eye. "Behold the strength of my Twilight Devil's Eye! Be sure not to lament your mistake when you're writing in pain! Seal, be broken!"

"...It's just red, like your other eye."

"Master, you forgot your contact."

"Heh. Hahaha! It seems I've used up all my MP for the day. Consider yourself lucky!"

Great, when Hiraga's not here, I have to be the brains for this gaggle of fools. Amane sighed, clearly tired of watching them bicker. *Guess that's just how it goes.*

"You two gonna keep playing around all day?" he asked. "We still have things to do. First, we have to go find Stella and Ikki, since they escaped. Let's start by splitting into two groups."

Taking up his new role, he proposed a search. Ouma immediately refused the proposal, however.

"There's no need to do that."

"No? Why not, Ouma?"

"My younger brother and sister have chosen to pursue death. The One-Armed Sword Master should be more than enough to deal with them, but should the worst happen, *she* is there as well."

That word, "she", jogged Amane's memory. Their true alma mater, Akatsuki Academy, operated quietly in a corner of Tokyo. It happened to have a certain visitor spending the day there.

"Oh, right. That's today, isn't it? She's visiting Akatsuki today, right?"

"Yes. They don't have a snowball's chance in hell with her there. The wisest move would be for all of us to pursue the Crimson Princess."

Amane had to agree with him. "She" was not a part of their strategy, but she was sympathetic to their cause. As thanks for a bed and a meal, she would gladly take up her sword for them. If she was

willing to act, then following Ikki and Shizuku to Akatsuki Academy was pointless.

“You sound pretty detached. You’re their brother, right? Aren’t you worried?”

“Idiotic,” Ouma spat venomously. “I abandoned them long ago. I have no reason to regret it now.”

“Ahaha! Man, poor Ikki’s got one heck of a family.”

“Tell me something, Amane. Seeing as you’re so infatuated with the boy, are *you* not worried?”

“Me, worried? Ahaha, yeah right!” Amane giggled at how off-the-mark Ouma’s assumption was. “I’m not worried one bit. In fact, I’m delighted. See, Ikki has to keep suffering more and more. He has to hurt more and more. Unbearable pain, impossible distress—the whole story of the Worst One is about how he keeps overcoming desperate circumstances. That’s what I reeeally love about him! I want to rough him up as much as possible!”

The more despair Ikki faced, the better. Exhausting himself to the point of coughing up blood yet still having the courage to fight against fate gave Amane chills.

“Geh heh... Vomit-inducingly crazy, as always.”

“Aww, don’t be mean. Isn’t it normal for a fan to want to see more of their hero in heroic situations?”

Just as Amane puffed out his cheeks in indignation, he received an email on his student handbook. He checked to find that it was from the still-absent leader of the group, Reisen Hiraga. According to the email, Alice had been handed over to Wallenstein, the supervisor of Akatsuki who doubled as a teacher. Furthermore, Reisen would be heading back to rejoin the others on their hunt.

Guess I really am the temporary brains, then.

That was the reason Amane had been the one to receive the email. Accepting his fate, he replied to the email, stating that they all would begin pursuing Stella, who had escaped thanks to Touka’s intervention.

“Okeydoke, let’s bag us a princess.”

Leading the Akatsuki students, Amane initiated the search for Stella and the Hagure twins.



“Son of a bitch! Of all the days for them to be delaying planes, it just *had* to be today!”

The students of Hagun and Akatsuki weren’t the only ones taking part in the fighting. The person shouting in anger was a young woman in a stunning kimono: Demon Princess Nene Saikyou, a temporary instructor at Hagun Academy.

“Tell me about it.”

Chiming in as she kept pace with Saikyou was World Clock Kurono Shinguuji, director of Hagun. The two had spent the past week in Osaka, where the Seven Stars would be held, each on separate business. They had just received word from faculty at their school that an attack was under way, so they had hoped to rush back to Tokyo. Unfortunately for them, the fastest mode of travel between the two cities—air travel—was delayed due to issues on the runway.

With no other choice left to them, they ran atop the track of the Tokaido Shinkansen toward Tokyo. Using their abilities together, they could run far faster than even bullet trains moved.

“Though maybe... it's *because* it's today.”

“Don't say that!” Saikyou made a disgusted face in response to Kurono's hypothesis. “I don't even wanna think about it.”

The way things stood, the pair lacked information. All they knew was that representatives from every school had gathered to attack their school; they didn't even know what the kids were after. They had a feeling, however, about the surprise attack with no media coverage and the abrupt grounding of airplanes: that it had all been very meticulously planned.

“Well, either way, it'll all be clear when we get there. And that means...”

We need to get there as soon as possible, Kurono thought, and prepared to put more power into her legs.

“Gh...!”

Both Saikyou and Kurono grunted. Though they were desperate to not waste even a second on their way, they were stopped by what seemed to be a gust of wind. There was no actual wind blowing, however. Even the sea was calm. Still, the faces of the two world-class knights were clouded with agitation and panic—enough to make their legs tremble and excessive sweat form on their brows.

What had stopped them in their tracks was not wind, but a bizarre fighting aura so powerful that it could be felt even from as far away as they were. A presence that was akin to having a blade against one's throat, despite the beautifully clear horizon ahead of them. Their preeminence as knights allowed them to experience it all the more acutely, causing them to recoil. Going that way would be plunging into danger. Being subjected to such overwhelming pressure set off alarm bells in their minds, causing them to stop.

“C-Could that be...?”

“H-Hey, whoa, hang on. Seriously? There's someone super dangerous among those lame-ass rebels!”

They knew just who that abnormal fighting spirit belonged to. There was only one person in the world who exuded an aura of that

caliber.

"It was only for an instant, so that must have been a threat. Hurry up, Nene!"

"I-I know, jeez!"

Their faces pale, Kurono and Saikyou surged ahead at full speed, caring not for the toll it took on them.

This fighting spirit is hers. If she's interested in all this, she must be after Kurogane! Kurono theorized about what was happening far beyond the horizon and prayed. *Don't rush things, kid! This is one stage you still can't stand on!*



With Ikki piloting the motorcycle per Shizuku's directions, the pair exited the populous city and passed through mountain roads. They traveled deep into the mountains in search of the hidden Akatsuki Academy. Just as they arrived in a forlorn area full of abandoned homes and came into view of the school building, something happened.

"Khnnnnnnnnnnn?!"

An abrupt pressure as powerful as if the sky itself were falling. Its incredible weight fell heavily on Ikki, as if crushing his intestines. He slammed on the brakes, bringing the motorcycle skidding to a stop.

"B-Big Brother? What's the matter?!" Shizuku gasped at the sudden stop.

She, still inexperienced as a warrior, had no idea what was going on, but Ikki was painfully aware that he had entered the realm of demons. That awareness left him speechless; he was completely unable to respond to Shizuku's question.

Forcing himself to swallow down the fear that seized and froze his very being, he calmed his breathing. He then materialized Intetsu in his right hand and gazed up at the roof of the main building of Akatsuki Academy. There, at its highest point, he saw a white gleam, but not that of the moon. What shone vaguely in the night sky was the figure of a human being, a woman resembling a Valkyrie from Norse mythology. In each of her hands was a sword, both pointed in Ikki's direction.



“The enemy?!”

Following Ikki’s line of sight, Shizuku noticed the woman’s presence. She quickly jumped off of the motorcycle and materialized Yoishigure, readying herself for battle.

“...”

The snow-white shadow, however, showed no interest in Shizuku. She merely gazed down in silence. Ikki knew that her stunning eyes were trained on him, thus he made a decision.

“Shizuku. Alice is inside this school, right?”

“Hm? Oh, yes. That’s right.”

“Then you should go in alone. I can deal with this woman by myself.”

“No! This is an all-out war that *they* started. There’s no reason to obsess over one-on-one—”

“Please, Shizuku. Go.”

“Big... Brother?” Shizuku looked to Ikki’s face and gulped. His tone of voice had taken her by surprise, seeming to have tried shoving her away, unwilling to take no for an answer. His expression, too, was more hardened, more grievous than she had ever seen before. “Is she that dangerous?”

“I’d say so.”

“But that just proves we should both—”

“No.” Though Shizuku persisted, Ikki shook his head. “I meant what I said before, Shizuku. I’m here to help you do what *you* want. If I hadn’t meant it, there would have been no point in me coming with you. You have to go find Alice now, or you might not make it in time. Just leave this to me.”

Ikki remained stubborn, stating his case, but Shizuku knew her brother. She could read between the lines. He had made it more than clear to her that if she stayed, he wouldn’t be able to protect her. That was just how dangerous the snow-white woman was.

“...Okay. Good luck out here, Big Brother.”

Shizuku nodded in understanding and left Ikki’s side to enter the main building of Akatsuki Academy by herself. She went in unobstructed; the pale-white girl did nothing to stop her. She remained in place atop the building, staring down at Ikki.

“Are you just going to let her through?”

“I am, as Sir Wallenstein is in there with the others. Regardless, whether I defeat you both here or defeat you alone before following after her, it will take the same amount of time.”

Her voice came like a song, echoing throughout the night with a refined tone.

“Maybe, for someone like you,” Ikki groaned, barely letting the words out.

I'm so screwed. Considering that they call themselves a school, I figured they'd have teachers. I didn't expect this, though...

Considering how strong the students were, Akatsuki's instructors being Rank A knights would have come as no surprise to Ikki. Such a fight was even something he had prepared for, but the woman facing him was more than *just* a Rank A knight. Much to his dismay, he knew exactly who the pale Valkyrie was.

"Everyone who adheres to the path of the sword knows who you are," he said. "The white glow that envelops you makes you seem angelic, with your twin swords as wings. The world's most detested criminal, but also its strongest swordsman, standing at the pinnacle of swordplay. In fact, you're so strong that governments all over the world have given up on trying to arrest you. There's no question about your strength, because you're Edelweiss, the Twin Wings, aren't you?"

"That's correct. You're not mistaken in knowing me as Twin Wings." The woman nodded, confirming Ikki's suspicion. Then, she cast a suspicious look down at him. "But I don't understand. You know who I am, yet you still draw your sword? Surely you're the kind of man who can see the difference in strength between us without needing our swords to cross. If you weren't, you wouldn't cower so."

"Man... And here I thought I was acting tough enough that you wouldn't see it." Ikki chuckled dryly, his fear identified.

She's right, though. I'm being really reckless right now.

He knew he couldn't win. Because of his skill as a knight, he could tell that the chasm between them was gargantuan. The woman before him was truly the strongest in the world, so he didn't even stand a chance. Far beyond even the summit of the Seven Stars, she was an enemy that he wasn't supposed to meet for several, perhaps even dozens of years, after tirelessly training and wholeheartedly devoting both body and soul to the way of the sword.

By no means was he supposed to face such an otherworldly foe at this point in time. It was too early a meeting; he wouldn't stand a chance. Twin Wings had said just as much, likely in order to give him a chance to withdraw. Ikki assumed as much, which made him realize something.

She's actually kind. If Ikki did withdraw, she would probably be more than willing to let him go. She really was a very nice person. *But that doesn't mean I can just give up and leave.*

Yes, she was terrifying. Her glare alone was enough to make his body tremble and cold sweat roll down his back. His knees buckled and his teeth chattered. It was by far the most intimidated he'd ever been by an impending duel. But he had a reason to overcome his fear, a reason to stand his ground. Thus, he mustered up all the bravado he could and forced a smile.

“...This is surprising. The strongest swordsman in the world asking a man with his sword drawn if he’s ready to fight?”

Ikki then pointed the tip of his blade, black as a crow’s wings, at the snow-white knight above him. In doing so, he displayed his clear intent to fight. It was enough to get the pale white knight to nod in response.

“Hmm. I suppose it was a pointless question.” That was the signal of the beginning of the end. “If I weren’t a member of this plot, I’d have no grievances with you. However, if bandits would choose to assault the place of my night’s sojourn, then I must prevent them from causing damage.”

The angelic swordswoman descended noiselessly from the tall school building. She seemed to glide down elegantly, her wings fluttering as she did.

“Kh...!”

The moment she touched down, Ikki felt such intense fear that it was almost as if his heart was exploding. His body, instincts, and even his very soul cried out, *Run. Run! Get out of here, damn it! If you don’t, you will die here!*, but he did not listen. He gritted his teeth and faced the immense pressure head-on.

“I am demise, awaiting at the distant peak. I am she who rends heaven and earth with twin blades. I am Edelweiss, the Twin Wings. Little boy, it’s time you learned how vast this world truly is.”

In that moment, the Worst One and the Twin Wings, the world’s strongest sword fighter, began their clash.



Around the time their battle began, Alice finally awoke from her forced blackout at the hands of Amane’s Device.

This is...

While she slowly reawakened, she analyzed the circumstances. A high ceiling was in her line of sight, brightly illuminated; judging by the sound of flowing air, she could tell that she was lying in a very large room; despite the season, she was chilled to her core. She must have been underground.

“Finally awake?”

“Ah!”

Alice tried to jump up at the sound of the voice, but in doing so, she made a haunting discovery.

They tied up my hands and feet!

It wasn’t ordinary rope that bound her, either. It was the strings of Reisen Hiraga’s Black Widow, as thin as the strings of a piano.

“Fool.”

While Alice wriggled like a caterpillar in her restraints, a shadow

hissed at her. She looked up at the shadow to find a familiar man's face.

"Wallenstein... Gah!"

"It's *Master* Wallenstein to you," the man replied, digging his boot into Alice's solar plexus. The pain threatened to gouge out her guts, forcing her to fully awaken.

Well, I guess I failed.

That had become all too clear to her. They'd known of her betrayal beforehand and had devised a countermeasure. But that was what made it all so bizarre. She hadn't done anything so foolish as to give herself away.

"How did you know I'd turn on you?"

"One of our Blazers has an ability that helped us figure it out. Nothing more to it."

"...I see."

That was all Alice needed to hear. It was by no means strange that a Blazer could do even something as illogical as that. After all, Blazers were able to do things that defied common sense.

I knew not knowing more about them would come back to bite me.

Not that there was any point in lamenting it now.

"When I first heard his prediction, I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Of all the Akatsuki students, how could it be that the one who served us most faithfully and obediently would come to betray us?"

"Sounds like I had you fooled."

"Of course you did. I was the one who'd chosen you, after all. I wanted it to be a lie, a mistake, anything that made him wrong, because I believed in you. Even today, of all days, right up until the end, I kept believing in you. But now..." Wallenstein's voice had been getting steadily shakier, but it suddenly turned to anger. "Why, why, *why*?! Why did you betray my hopes?!"

"Gah! Hngh!"

In a fit of rage, Wallenstein kicked Alice over and over as she lay on the floor of Akatsuki Academy's underground training field.

"You should know! You should be painfully aware of this! This world is full of lies, and it's meaningless to love anything! I *taught* you all of this! Yet here you are, making the same damned mistake again! Didn't you abandon it all?! Didn't you realize the same truth we had awoken to?!"

"Gah! Achk! Kahah!"

Bones broke, internal organs bled, and Alice began to cough up black blood, but Wallenstein continued his rampage. His fiery rage burned hotter the more he battered her, his knowledge of her past making the situation all the more incomprehensible. How could the

talented child he'd picked out and raised have been so foolish as to deny power?

"What was the point of all this?! Answer me!" Wallenstein demanded, halting his kicking as he nearly hyperventilated.

"You're right," Alice said, smirking self-derisively. "I thought I could do all that."

She began to think about how, when she'd lost Yuuri and the others, she'd wanted to abandon it all. That was why she'd requested the money from Wallenstein. The act of giving so much money to the nun—enough to raise Alice's former little siblings—was for the sake of cutting ties with them completely. But when Alice had delivered the sum and told the nun that she'd killed the mafia and sold herself as an assassin, the nun had brought her that green bottle of liquor from within the church's storage shed.

"Take this and leave," she'd said as tears flowed from her eyes. *"You'll need it more than we will. I only hope that one day, it will help you to remember the promise you and Yuuri made to each other."*

Alice had had no intention of taking it, of course. It was the remnant of a dream to love and protect others, despite the two children never receiving love and protection in their own upbringing. She hadn't wanted to see it. She had planned to abandon it like everything else when she left with Wallenstein, and to hate all the world forevermore.

"But in the end, I just couldn't part with it." She'd fallen so far as to abandon her morals and stoop to murder, but not even that could make Alice bring herself to leave the bottle. And then, with it still in her possession, she'd met the one girl that she was willing to risk everything to protect. "When I met Shizuku, I finally remembered the kind of adult I wanted to be. I also remembered my own desire—one that I was never able to let go of even after I ran away from home, got corrupted, and fell into the abyss. I'll keep her dream alive! I won't let you people do as you please!"

Back then, Alice had made a vow. Even if Shizuku were to find out who she truly was and never love her as a sister again, she would still do everything in her power to protect the girl that helped her remember who she was. She had every intention of upholding that vow, so she quickly broke her confines—unworthy of being called as such by an assassin as skilled as she—and leaped to her feet. Wasting no time at all, she instantly materialized Darkness Hermit and pointed it at Wallenstein's shadow.

"Trash."

The moment she tried to bind him, his foot once again smashed into her solar plexus. It was an immediate counter, as if he'd predicted her attack, but in actuality, he'd merely known that the Black Assassin

wouldn't be held down by such weak restraints. Because he'd known that, he was able to get a head start.

"Ngh!"

Darkness Hermit fell from Alice's hand as she collapsed back onto the floor. The impact to her diaphragm made it impossible to breathe. Wallenstein looked down on his disciple, who writhed in agony.

"I know just how shortsighted you are. You've fallen in love with her. Well, that's just perfect," he said with a grin so sadistic that it sent chills down Alice's back.

"Huh?"

Before Alice could ask what he meant by "just perfect", part of the underground training area's ceiling boomed as it caved in. A giant chunk of semisolid ice fell through the hole as it formed, crashing into the floor but not losing its shape. Inside the orb was a small, silver-haired girl.

"Sh-Shizuku?!"

Lorelei, Shizuku Kurogane, had found her friend.



"I finally found you, Alice."

When Shizuku revealed herself after descending from the ceiling, Alice's face grew paler than ever before.

"Wh-Why are you here?! Didn't I tell you to forget about me?!"

"Yes, and I heard you."

"Then—"

"I don't remember agreeing to that, though."

"Ah..." The matter-of-fact way Shizuku said it left her speechless. Indeed, she hadn't agreed to it, but that didn't explain anything. "Did you forget that I'm a murderer? That I was lying to you the whole time? So why...?"

Alice struggled to suppress the agony in her expression as memories of that day once again flooded her mind. The faces of her little siblings as they looked at her blood-soaked form in horror. She was an awful murderer. There was no worth in Shizuku having come to save her.

"Because I care about you, Alice. Do I need another reason?"

Unafraid, unmalicious, Shizuku gave a blunt, direct answer. Her green eyes were filled with the same kindness as ever, unaffected by the knowledge of who Alice truly was. "It doesn't matter what secrets you have or how many crimes you've committed in the past. The Alice I know is stylish, cool, calming to be around, good with hair care, *really* good with makeup, willing to listen to my constant worries—even worry with me—and always helps cheer me up. You're the one friend

who's been willing to fight for me and the person I love, and that's all that matters. I can't just forget about my loving sister, can I?"

"Shizuku..."

"Don't think our friendship only goes one way. I care about you just as much as you care about me, Alice. Did you really think I'd let these fools take you away?"

Alice had no words to respond to Shizuku's steadfast determination; the emotions welling up in her heart left her unable to string more than two words together. She'd thought Shizuku hated her, she'd expected to see the same look in her eyes as she'd seen in her long-lost siblings, yet Shizuku loved her just as much as ever, not changing in the slightest. That unwavering love brought back a fierce emotion Alice thought she'd lost. The one desire she'd never dreamed of even asking for, the one she'd thought she didn't deserve, had returned to her.

Shizuku, I...

"Enough talk."

"Gah!"

Just then, Wallenstein's boot slammed onto Alice's back. The kick ruptured an organ, causing Alice to nearly faint from the pain. She curled into a ball, coughing painfully.

"Stay there where you belong and watch. This is what you get for betraying me."

He looked down at his student with a cold glare and materialized a giant broadsword in his right hand before slowly approaching Shizuku. Finally, the meaning behind his "just perfect" had been made clear to Alice: he intended to kill Shizuku before her very eyes.

"No... Stop... Ack!"

Though she tried to stop Shizuku, her spasming diaphragm prevented the words from coming out. All she could do was pray.

Run, Shizuku! Your water abilities have no effect on him! Just run, please!

They weren't master and pupil for show. Alice was well aware of just how strong Wallenstein was despite having only one arm. She knew the Noble Arts he had at his disposal, unparalleled in both offense and defense.

Sadly, her desperate pleas went unheard. It made no difference, though, for even if Shizuku had heard her, she wouldn't have listened. She was prepared to face whatever challenge awaited her, and showed no signs of fleeing. Instead, she posed a question to the approaching Wallenstein.

"So, you must be the boss of my oldest brother and the rest of Akatsuki. Am I right?"

"I'm Wallenstein of the Rebellion."

“I don’t care about your name. My only demand is that you return Alice to us.”

“Do you think I’ll just hand her over to you?”

“No, but I figured you would at least hear me out.” Shizuku waved Yoishigure like a baton, taunting him from within her watery sphere. “After all... this gives me a good excuse to end your life.”

As if responding to her motions, the mass of water that surrounded her transformed into a huge whip. Moisture gathered at the end of it and solidified, forming a weapon. The hammer of ice that she’d created, a spike on its face, then descended toward Wallenstein.



The icy mallet smashed into the ground, breaking the floor with a loud bang and a cloud of dust.

“Well, aren’t you cool, girl?”

She’d missed; it had fallen just to the side of Wallenstein. Still uninjured, he continued his slow walk toward Shizuku. If the mallet had hit him directly, he’d have been smashed to bits. Despite what she had said, perhaps she’d hesitated?

No. Shizuku alone was different. Among Ikki’s gaggle of friends, she was, without a doubt, the cruelest and most ruthless when it was necessary for her to be. She’d meant it when she’d said she would kill him. She had fully intended to crush Wallenstein with the spiked mallet, but for some reason, she had missed.

Did he evade it? Wallenstein didn’t look as if he had moved, but for Shizuku, a girl with the highest possible level of magic control, it was hard to imagine that she would miss. Did he use some sort of ability? *Well, it doesn’t matter either way.*

Even if she didn’t know what sort of trick he’d used, it just meant that she had to blanket the area so that her foe couldn’t hope to avoid all of her attacks.

“Toudo Heigen. Keppuu San’u. Fire away.”

With that supposition, she started off by freezing the floor. Once she had profoundly limited her opponent’s mobility, she then transformed the giant mass of water around her into the shape of a hedgehog. The moment her attack had been readied, needles of water were sent flying in all directions like an unmanned machine gun’s fire. In the space of a second, tens of thousands of high-pressure bullets dug at and carved away pieces of the arena.

The amount of water she used was an order of magnitude greater even than when she had fought Raikiri, but that was to be expected. As she had been up against a knight who used electricity, Shizuku had needed to purify every last drop of water that she’d used in order to make it act as an insulator. That necessity had limited the amount of

water she could use at once, but fortunately for her, she no longer faced no such a restriction. She could use hundreds of times the amount of water that she used against Raikiri. She had more than enough water to riddle the floors, walls, and ceiling of the underground training area with holes.

Her attack was like an endless storm of suppressive fire. In the closed space that was the underground training area, there was nowhere to escape to. Wallenstein was no exception, as he could not evade the shower of bullets. Just as Shizuku had planned, Keppuu San'u was a direct hit on her target.

“Huh?!”

Though he had taken the attack head-on, Wallenstein's advance did not stop. Far from being made into mincemeat, he continued to walk with the same composure, his gait undisturbed. Leisurely, smoothly, even on the frozen floor.

What in the world? It's like Toudo Heigen and Keppuu San'u are doing nothing!

Mist and dust blanketed the debris that surrounded them, yet Wallenstein was completely undamaged. Incredibly, even his clothes were still bone dry. How in the world such a thing was possible bewildered Shizuku, but Wallenstein only chuckled slightly as he watched her.

“Damn shame. If it weren't for us being enemies, I'd be interested in you. But hey, I guess that's fate.”

Within ten yards of Shizuku, he slowly lifted his sword until it rested on his shoulder. Seeing him in that stance sent a shudder through Shizuku's entire body. Her instincts were telling her that the One-Armed Sword Master was preparing for his ultimate move.

Something's coming!

Shizuku rushed to retract the bullets of Keppuu San'u and form a barrier of ice to protect herself. The resulting rampart was stronger even than permafrost. Her fortress made for perfect defense.

“Shizukuuu!” Alice cried. “Don't try to defeend!”

“Wha—?!”

“Bergschneiden.”

With a swing of Wallenstein's sword, the entirety of Shizuku's defenses were instantly, easily cut through.



“Haaaah!”

Against the world's strongest sword fighter, Edelweiss, the Worst One, Ikki Kurogane, enveloped himself in a fierce blue aura. He had activated his Noble Art, Ittou Shura even before the first crossing of their blades. Though the technique limited him to only one minute of

fighting, he wouldn't stand a fraction of a chance if he didn't use it at the outset of their battle. The difference in strength between them was easy for him to see, so if he wanted to fight the world's strongest, he would be limited to a single minute.

His judgment was correct. Ikki became certain that he had made no error in using Ittou Shura when Edelweiss charged in to attack, enveloped in wind. The moment she swung her twin swords, he lost sight of them.

"Kh?!"

Panicked, he jumped back, and the air in front of his face tore immediately after. Something ridiculously sharp and invisible had just barely grazed the tip of his nose. Based on its scent, Ikki knew that this invisible object was one of Edelweiss' swords.

I can't see her slashes! Far too fast and far too sharp, even the afterimages of the snow-white swords guided by Edelweiss' hands were imperceptible to the naked eye. All that he had just barely perceived was a slight sheen in the air as it was nearly ignited by the friction of a blade passing through it. She's so agile! If I drop my guard for even a second, I might lose my head!

It was then that Ikki abandoned breathing for the rest of the fight; he literally did not have the time to breathe. To fight off Edelweiss' repeated twin flashes, he would have to mobilize every nerve, never falling behind her speed. If he wanted to keep up with her, he would have to use the nigh-invisible sword slash that boasted the greatest speed among his techniques.

Using his Seventh Secret Sword: Raikou, an attack that was only possible through the use of Ittou Shura, he countered the incoming slashes. One, two, three, four—a total of ten slashes in which every entanglement of steel sent white sparks flying into the night air. Each of her invisible attacks, released in the space of a single breath, was fended off by Ikki as he used the movements of both her body and eyes to calculate the arcs of her next moves. Yet despite his ability to withstand the first assault, Ikki's expression was warped with shock.

I-Incredible!

Both of his arms were tingling from having blocked every last attack. Her swings weren't just fast; they were extremely strong as well. More so than even Ikki's Raikou, despite her using only one hand. Of course, he had already guessed how that was possible.

"Hrk!"

Ikki once again used Raikou to defend against Edelweiss' continued pursuit. Amidst a shower of sparks, he became certain that his guess was correct.

That's it! None of this woman's actions make any noise whatsoever!

Her steps and her slashes were all perfectly silent. In essence,

shockwaves created by vibrations in the air were what created sound. In other words, it could be called the dispersion—the loss—of physical force. But if one could control all the energy created by their actions and use it in a way that avoided such waste, the result would be that their actions would be inaudible, as both speed and power approached the absolute limit of their potential.

Such a thing would seem impossible for humans, but it was clearly possible for the woman Ikki faced. Drawing that conclusion, Ikki shuddered as he swallowed the saliva that had collected in his mouth.

So this is the world's best swordplay! In her approach, in her swordsmanship, she was clearly on a different level. Ikki couldn't find a single moment to go on the offensive; he could only continue to defend against the fervent, rhythmless assault. *But I can't just sit here guarding the whole time! Even with Raikou, I can just barely defend myself; my speed and strength just aren't enough! If I can't turn this around, I'll be down within five seconds! I'll just have to throw everything I've got at her!*

Thus, he would have to change up his tactics and find a way to attack her. It would have been silly of him to blindly believe that a good offense was the best defense, but there was an element of truth to those words. Even if he wasn't able to damage Edelweiss, his attempts would be worthwhile if it meant he could break her posture. He was determined to go on the offensive against the world's strongest sword fighter. He wouldn't be stingy with his attacks, either; he couldn't afford to be against an enemy like her.

Steeling himself, he converted his determination into action, first backstepping to escape the high-speed assault from Edelweiss' twin blades. She quickly pursued, jumping forward with her blades held in the shape of a cross. It was a stance that perfectly balanced defending her front and preparing to attack. Hers was the optimal action against a foe in front—and it also was exactly what Ikki had predicted she would do.

Here goes!

Ikki stepped toward the approaching Edelweiss. Then, using special footwork that alternated between decreasing and increasing in speed, he created afterimages in front of himself. He was using his Fourth Secret Sword: Shinkirou.

His mesmerizing footwork fooled Edelweiss into attacking one of his afterimages. Her blades crossed once more as she slashed with both left and right hands at once, but because it was only an afterimage, she had only cut through air. As a result...

Her chest is open! Thinking he had her, Ikki prepared Intetsu to attack. However, just as he planned to plunge his sword into her, he

jerked his body back. Immediately after, the space where Ikki's neck had been was assailed by an invisible blade. *No! Her counters are faster than my attacks! I won't be able to finish it like this! But I'm not going to give up after just one or two tries!*

If he'd stayed in her range carelessly, his head would be separated from his torso in no time flat. To avoid that, Ikki once again went on the offensive, shifting his focus from speed to power. Twisting his upper body against his lower body like a spring, Ikki put all of his weight and every last bit of power in his disposal into the point of his sword and charged. It was the Worst One's most powerful sword skill, a thrust known as the First Secret Sword: Saigeki.

Ikki's strongest attack, one that could pierce through even massive boulders. Its propulsion and penetrative ability were extraordinary. Even to Edelweiss, the only option available was to move out of the way.

"What?!"

The naïveté of that belief was instantly made clear as Saigeki lost its propulsion and Ikki's charge halted. The cause of that shutdown lay at the tip of Intetsu, where Saigeki's power was concentrated. Incredibly, Edelweiss had stopped its charge using the tip of one of her own swords. Intetsu's tip was as thin as even a needle, yet she had perfectly matched its position with that of the tip of her own sword. With one hand, she had calmly, coolly stopped Ikki's strongest attack.

"Urgh!" Ikki faltered somewhat as she seemed to show off the difference in ability between them. Edelweiss did not fail to notice his faltering, and seized the opportunity created by the momentary dulling of Ikki's reflexes. "Ngh?!"

Her sword finally cut through the skin of his forehead, causing it to spew blood. To make matters worse, that blood had flowed down into his eyes.

I can't see!

Naturally, Edelweiss wouldn't miss a fatal opening when it was presented to her. She began her white-hot pursuit once more, repeating her ten-strike combo from the start of their fight. Her blades again cut through the air at blistering speeds.

"Haaaaaah!"

"Gh?!"

Much to her surprise, Ikki had reacted to every single slash, driving away every last potential killing blow. Though robbed of his eyesight, he showed no sign of fear, because he had no need for vision.

I may not be able to see her swings, but from her movements, I can at least estimate where they'll go!

Edelweiss' breathing, swordplay, tempo, and footwork. The

Worst One had spent their fight gathering all of that information, uncovering his opponent's very nature with his peerless observational skills. Perfect Vision, the other weapon at his disposal, had allowed him to read all of Edelweiss' swordplay. He no longer needed vision because he could read all of her incoming moves without it.

"You're quite good."

The world's strongest was even moved to admiration for Ikki, whose mind's eye made up for the failure of his physical eyes. Even so, her assault didn't let up. She continued to attack head-on, making full use of the absolute advantage granted to her by her twin swords.

Edelweiss knew that even if Ikki knew every last bit of her swordplay, the chasm between them was so great that he could never hope to fill it with mere prediction. She had no need for cheap tricks; she just had to overwhelm him with strength and speed. Ikki, too, knew that her conclusion was entirely correct, that he would quickly be defeated if she continued.

It's time to decide this battle!

He had one final method to change the tide of battle. To make it work, he began to think while continuing to fend off the invisible, inaudible assault.

Edelweiss hadn't fallen back even once during their fight. She would occasionally defend herself while still advancing, but she had never evaded an attack. Why? Simply because she had no need to. Evading was pointless; defending with one hand while attacking with the other was more than enough. Judging by the difference in power between them, Edelweiss was certain that Ikki's sword would be nothing against her own. Therefore, she did not choose to evade.

And if that's the case... That was where Ikki's chance of survival lay. It was because of her certainty that the situation was so easy to read. *I'll use this as a starting point to break her rhythm!*

Ikki assumed his final offensive stance. Repelling her white blades with a powerful blow, he delayed his counterattack, then forced a diagonal strike from below. Intetsu's blade scraped just slightly against the ground, carving the earth away as it moved for Edelweiss. The swing was as fast as a gale despite its large arc, but it wouldn't be enough to reach Edelweiss.

If Ikki's sword was the wind, Edelweiss' twin blades were a flash of lightning. There was no doubt that she would block his slash, but that didn't matter. There was a reason he was going to make her block the attack. The moment she blocked Intetsu, he would contract every muscle from his fingers to his toes, creating a shockwave.

The human body was little more than a sack of meat filled with water. Thus, it was easily influenced by vibrations, with mere ripples created by specific vibrations able to disrupt its inner workings. The

principle behind the technique was an element of a certain style of Chinese martial arts, Ikki was simply using his sword to do what a martial artist would use their hands or feet for.

Like a poison that disrupted the nervous system, as long as the strike connected, its target would be hindered. If a direct hit on the target's armor, it would disrupt their internal organs; if blocked with the target's own sword, it would affect their arms by traveling through the sword. That was the methodology behind the Sixth Secret Sword: Dokuga no Tachi.

Taking into account the difference in strength between them, Edelweiss would not evade Ikki's strike. Her actions were proof that she had accurately judged the chasm between them. Unbeknownst to her, however, a situation in which the enemy would not try to evade was exactly where Dokuga no Tachi flourished.

Completely unsuspecting of his plan, she blocked the poisonous blade with her own. Though she was the world's strongest, she was still human, with a body constructed quite similarly to anyone else's. Knowing that she had no way to stop the poison, Ikki used all the muscles in his body to create a shockwave to travel through Edelweiss' sword. What resulted was a mist of blood that sprayed from Ikki himself.

"Huh?"

Skin all over his body tore, sending blood through the air. The reason was quickly made apparent to him, as it was quite simple: Edelweiss had done the exact same thing that he had attempted to do to her, but with much greater speed and force. As a result, Ikki's own shockwave had been overpowered by the one coming from Edelweiss, disrupting his own body.

Ikki had believed that he had seen through Edelweiss' swordplay, but that was no more than an illusion. She had intentionally led him to believe that he could outsmart her, but in truth, he was nothing but putty in her hands. That fact became a chilly shiver that shook Ikki's very being.

It's even worse than I thought. The top of the world is just too far away.

Though he had used all his strength, all his skills to the greatest possible degree and exhausted every possible ploy, Ikki was still unable to even touch Edelweiss. Faced with strength that went off the charts within his mind, he was shocked beyond belief.

A moment later, the end came for him. Edelweiss swung her right sword at Ikki, whose last angle of attack had been exhausted. The snow-white blade, invisible as it swung, tore through both Intetsu and Ikki.

"Ah..."

The blow dealt to Ikki by her blade was not deep, but as his Device—the manifestation of his soul—had been destroyed, so went with it Ikki's consciousness. His collapse marked the end of Edelweiss' assault, for she knew that she no longer needed to continue. She recognized that the battle was over and turned away from Ikki.

"Ngh... Aaaaahhhhhhh!"

"Tch!"

However, just before Ikki's body could finish crumpling, he squeezed out the last bits of his strength in rejection of his defeat. Ikki grabbed a shard of Intetsu from the air and, with a roar, once again attacked Edelweiss. Though it was easily fended off by her white blades, his actions caused a tremor somewhere deep within Edelweiss.

"You'd choose to continue?" she asked the swordsman before her, who still stood to fight despite his heavy breathing and the fact that he held a shard of his crystallized, shattered soul. "It's evident that our levels of strength are too far apart for you to even have a chance. Your sword, the materialization of your soul, has been broken. It has left you at the brink of consciousness. You're in no condition to fight, so why do you still hinder me? I don't want to hurt a child any more than absolutely necessary. Far from it, I have no desire to kill you or your sister. Continuing to try to stop me only puts her in yet more danger, as Wallenstein will likely have no mercy for even a person as young as her. I'm sure you are aware of that, are you not?"

"Yeah..." Ikki nodded in response, still breathing hoarsely. "I know... that you're a kind person."

"Then why do you not cease?"

"Because... Shizuku wouldn't want me to." Clinging desperately to the last thread of his consciousness, Ikki stared fixedly through his foggy field of view at Edelweiss as he explained why he would not yield. "If I let you through... sure, you might save Shizuku, but what about Alice?!"

"That child is a criminal of the underworld. How else would you expect her to meet her end?"

"You might be right, but that's not what Shizuku wants. That's why we're here! I promised that I would help her do what she needs to do! I'll die before I let you through!"

"You'll die?" Edelweiss cocked her seemingly face in confusion. "Surely your life isn't that cheap. As we just traded blades, I can say with certainty that I know how bright the fires of ambition and yearning burn within you. You have a dream, and a loved one as well. Can you really claim that you're willing to lose your life here, despite all that?"

Her question was met with a slight grin from Ikki.

"This is... the first time."

“What?”

“The first time... Shizuku’s ever asked anything of me.” Ikki continued to speak as he thought of his relationship with his sister. “Even though I’ve only ever made her worry about me, even though I’ve never been anything like a big brother should be, she’s always loved me. But today, for the first time, she asked something of me for her own benefit. That’s more than enough reason for me to risk my life!”

She had entrusted her needs to such a failure of a brother. More than ever before, Ikki refused to yield. If a brother couldn’t risk his life for the sake of his sister’s one wish, the wish of such an incredibly bright girl who supported him through thick and thin, what kind of brother was he? He would never give up on helping her, so he screamed:

“I’ll use my greatest weakness to keep your strength at bay!”

As long as there was life left in him, Ikki would not let her through. Relying solely on his willpower and determination, Ikki stood, blocking Edelweiss’ path.

What incredible strength of will. Are these the eyes of a young man who’s finally begun to find himself? Even Edelweiss could see the depth of his determination through the light in his eyes. Her breath was taken away. A boy with so much strength and ambition, yet with such a virtuous soul that he would risk his life for another. *It’s been so long since I last met someone I could consider to be beautiful.*

“Boy, would you tell me your name?”

“...Ikki Kurogane.”

“‘Kurogane’. I apologize for my discourteousness, young samurai,” Edelweiss said, gracefully hopping backward to create a greater distance between herself and Ikki. “You’re no child in need of protection. You’re a man worthy of fighting with all my strength as a swordswoman. Now, using the greatest swordplay ever known to this world, I will slay the swordsman known as Ikki Kurogane.”

Finally, the world’s strongest sword fighter had gotten serious. Immeasurable fighting spirit radiated from her, more palpable than ever before. She was a veritable storm of light.

Sand was pulled into the air as the trees seemed to shriek. Glass windows in the vicinity all shattered instantly. Exuding such an incredible presence despite her small form, the lone woman extended her twin swords like wings and flew.

“Prepare thyself.”

Edelweiss then took aim at her foe—not a child, but a swordsman deserving of respect—and aimed to end his life.

“Gh...!”

Just before their renewed conflict, Ikki sensed the Reaper’s

footsteps, accompanied by the honed blade that would permanently sever his future. If he did not defend, he would die. The situation he was in had changed, however. In their earlier fight, Edelweiss had cut corners, fighting humbly, but after recognizing him as a warrior, the speed of her advance became greater than ever. The flash of light that followed her was not from her swordplay, but from her very form as she moved.

The final confrontation between the two swordsmen ended soundlessly in the space of a single second, followed by a bloody haze that disappeared into the darkness. Denied even the opportunity to cry out in agony, Ikki Kurogane fell.



If Alice hadn't screamed, I would've been in real danger.

Shizuku gulped, cognizant of the fact that if her judgment had been delayed slightly, she would have lost her life rather than just an arm.

"Hrk..." she groaned as the numbing pain coming from her injury finally reached her brain. Her left arm had been severed just above the elbow. She had no time to yelp from the pain, however; the enemy she faced had already penetrated her fortress of ice and severed her arm with one slash, and he was ready to unleash another.

"Byakuya Kekkai!"

"Hmm?!"

Shizuku took appropriate action, evaporating all the moisture around her to use as a smokescreen that hid her from Wallenstein. In the precious moment she'd bought herself, Shizuku froze the wound left by the loss of her arm to stop the bleeding and ran. She circled around Wallenstein, to the one place that she hadn't directed the missiles from Keppuu San'u: Alice's side.

If his ability is what I think it is, he's dangerously close to having one of the strongest I've ever heard of!

A slash that could pierce any defense, defensive ability that allowed him to stroll through a rain of bullets, and even a stride that was unaffected by Toudo Heigen. Shizuku wouldn't be able to win a fair fight, so she would take Alice and flee. Wallenstein wouldn't make it simple for her, though.

"Stay still, you crafty little...!"

"Ah?!"

He stabbed his sword into the floor, causing her to slip and fall over. Though she tried to stand again, she continued to slip, fall, slip, and fall again.

Why can't I stand up?!

Had Toudo Heigen, the skating rink of her own creation, done

this to her? No. Because Toudo Heigen was Shizuku's own ability, it couldn't obstruct her actions on its own. She could be even more certain of this because of her level of magic control. Why, then? There could only be one answer. Some other trickery was afoot.

"This is...!" There was no doubt in her mind. Confirming that the premonition deep within her was true, Shizuku asked Wallenstein as he gradually exited the mist. "You removed the friction from the floor below me, didn't you?!"

"Correct. You're a quick learner," he answered, still slowly approaching Shizuku. "Striking, slashing, shooting—every application of power in this world is closely related to friction. A bullet may be driven by incredible force, but if there's no friction at the point of contact, it will simply slip along the target's skin. When this power is converted into offense, it becomes a sword that can slide even between the molecules of any material. That is the true ability of Wallenstein, the One-Armed Sword Master."

A perfect sword on offense, and a divine shield on defense. That was the power of the ability to manipulate friction, an essential element of all attacks.

"Sh-Shizuku! Ruuuuun!"

"Ah..."

Alice watched on in terror as Wallenstein, finally standing before Shizuku, split the silver-haired girl's body in half. Her upper body, separated from her lower body at the waist, fell onto the frozen floor. It slid on the ice as it endlessly spurted blood and leaked entrails.

"N-NOOOOOOOOOO!"

In the face of pure despair, Alice's scream echoed loudly throughout the underground chamber.



"..."

Though Edelweiss had cut Ikki Kurogane down, her face was pale with shock. She cast her mind back to the moment she'd won the match, to an unbelievable event that had occurred amidst the blinding light of their battle. In that moment, confronted by the world's strongest swordsman, Ikki Kurogane had still moved to attack.

She hadn't held back in those final moments like she had before, yet he still had not hesitated in the slightest. As she pushed yet further to take his life, he plunged the remains of his shattered sword into the nearly microscopic opening that her action had created, trying until the very end to defeat her. His attack had forced even someone as powerful as her to defend herself for a mere instant, dulling her attack. Her final step forward to take Ikki's life had been wasted, converted to a step back to save herself. As a result, Edelweiss could

not snuff out the light of Ikki Kurogane's soul.

That swordplay at the end was definitely...

"My word. I didn't expect this." Edelweiss stood next to the fallen Ikki and held a snow-white blade to his neck. Then, she chuckled. "Laying a hand on a fallen enemy would only serve to bring shame to me."

"K-Kurogane!"

She suddenly heard a voice, and turned toward the source of it.

"Is that you, World Clock?"

"Damn you, Edelweiss!"

Kurono Shinguuji leaped over the wall surrounding the area to find Ikki Kurogane, covered in blood and lying unconscious. In her anger, she materialized her Device—a pair of pistols, one white and one black—and pointed them at Edelweiss while still flying through the air.

"Calm yourself."

"Tch...!"

The moment she was pierced by Edelweiss' gaze, Kurono's fingers froze on the triggers. She was petrified by the fear that threatened to destroy her very soul. She finally landed, struggling just to keep the barrels pointed at Edelweiss. Her fingers still refused to move.

It was Kurono's own instincts of all things that kept her from firing. If she moved her fingers even a tiny bit, the area would immediately erupt into battle—a battle that she knew full well she could not win.

"You monster..."

"That is quite the greeting toward someone you haven't seen in so long." Edelweiss spoke coolly to Kurono, whose face clearly betrayed fretfulness. "Be at ease. He's still alive."

"R-Really?!"

"Yes, though it was not my intention to let him live."

Edelweiss punctuated her statement with a chuckle, before leaping soundlessly to her perch atop Akatsuki Academy's main building.

"Wh-Where are you going?!"

"Home. I was never meant to be entangled in any of this to begin with," Edelweiss replied, turning her attention again to the young samurai who had so bravely confronted her. Then, she thought of the great trials he would face in the coming Seven Stars Battle Festival. Despite her not being closely connected to Akatsuki's plan, she had a general idea of the bigger picture.

You probably have an inkling of this yourself, don't you, boy? In his coming battles, Ikki would not be hindered by the Gale Sword Emperor or even the Crimson Princess. *In the near future, Amane*

Shinomiya will block your path.

Their battle would be far crueler than Ikki could ever imagine, possibly even more so than his fight with Edelweiss. It was for that reason that Edelweiss left a few words of advice for the Worst One.

“World Clock. Once Kurogane awakens, I’d like you to tell him something for me: ‘Next time, I hope you’ll be a worthy opponent for me.’”

And then, still without a sound, the world’s strongest sword fighter disappeared into the indigo night.

“I’ll make sure to tell him,” Kurono replied, watching the sky in the direction Edelweiss had left before running over to Ikki.

Indeed, he had been severely beaten, but it wasn’t fatal. He could definitely be saved—a fact that relieved Kurono deeply.

Well done. You stood toe-to-toe against Edelweiss, and you’ll live to tell the tale.

“...Oh?”

Just as she was going to use her time manipulation ability to close Ikki’s wounds, Kurono saw something unbelievable in her periphery. On the white concrete where Edelweiss had stood were red spots. Though it was only a few splotches, it was definitely blood. Blood not from Ikki’s body, but from the body of someone who had stood there mere seconds ago.

He actually wounded her?! A boy this young scratched the strongest in the world?!

Ikki’s sword had found its mark. It had left only a few drops of blood and was hardly even worth calling a wound, yet it was absolute proof that the Worst One’s sword had left its mark on the top of the world.

“Hah... Hahah. You’re always full of surprises. You’ve got one hell of a future, kid.”

Kurono trembled with excitement, joy, and shock all at once. She then started tending to Ikki’s wounds, assessing the situation anew while she did.

When Kurono and Saikyou had returned to Hagun, nobody was present except for the unconscious student council members. She’d looked into the past to figure out what had happened, then sent Saikyou to recover Stella and the Hagures while she went to recover Ikki, Shizuku, and Alice. However, only Ikki was present, so where had the other two gone?

Kurono focused her senses, searching for magic nearby. In doing so, she made a shocking discovery.

“That’s...!”

Just below her, deep underground, something unbelievable was happening.



Huh? Am I...?

Shizuku slowly awakened from the shock of having her senses blown away by such an intense impact. She opened her heavy eyes and looked forward.

Alice...

She was facing upward. Alice's face, upside down, was in her field of vision. She couldn't hear what Alice was screaming so desperately about while tears flowed down her face. She could tell that something was wrong, however, and turned her eyes downward. When she did, she realized that she had lost her lower body, prompting her to remember what had happened.

Right. I got cut in half.

As if catching up with her awoken mind, her bodily senses slowly returned. The feeling of loss grew ever thicker.

I lost my lower body and a ton of my organs.

Her organs must have spilled out of where she'd been split apart. There was no doubt that it was a fatal wound; she was acutely aware that she would be dead in under a minute.

How annoying.

Once again, she had been unable to win. It was just like when she'd fought Raikiri. She had, for the second time, fallen to her enemy's sword because of her failure to take control of a long-range magic battle.

I'm so weak...

She didn't even have the strength to suppress a faraway opponent unless their strength was below a certain threshold. She was more bitterly aware than ever of that fact.

If I died, would my brother be sad?

He probably would. And not just him; Stella, Alice, and everyone else would too, because she was surrounded by so many kind people. Even someone as unpleasant and ugly as her would be mourned. The image of them all filled her mind, and she realized that she hated the sight.

Well, I suppose it's time I gave it a shot.

After her loss to Raikiri, she had thought constantly about how her ability was only usable from a distance; such a tiny, weak girl could not control a fight at close range. She'd decided she had to do something about that, yet she was able to find only a single way to make up for that weakness—one that was completely lunatic and came with innumerable risks. It was something she had never so much as tested after discovering, yet something she had to attempt right away, lest she be dead within seconds. She wasn't one to leave a job

unfinished, so she closed her eyes and, just like the older brother she respected so deeply, resolved herself to believe in her own strength.

I have to do every last thing I can.



“Shizuku... Shizuku...”

Alice held Shizuku’s severed torso in her arms. Blood and entrails still seeped from her with a squishing noise as the weight and the life disappeared from her. The tangible feeling of loss turned Alice’s vision dark, seeming to paint her over emotions with blackness as she was subjected to the sight of losing her beloved little sister, who she’d pledged to protect. Anger at herself for her powerlessness, fury at the man who had stolen her sister’s life—Alice no longer felt even those. She had not even the energy to speak.

“This is the truth you tried so desperately to avoid,” Wallenstein said from behind her, interrupting her grieving. “Power is the one hard truth. I taught you this. I even had the kindness to bring you to the side of the strong. Yet if you refuse to understand that, you were always beyond saving. An assassin who develops feelings for their target is useless. Here, you die.”

His voice dripped with disgust, probably in disappointment at the sight of his student clinging to what was now nothing but a husk. The sound of wind reached Alice’s ears from behind her. No doubt it was the sound of Wallenstein preparing his sword. She didn’t think of evading the coming blow, however; rather, she begged for the sweet release to come faster.

Through it all, the weight of Shizuku still dripped from Alice’s hands, the knowledge that it would never return making it all the more unbearable. Her tiny body slowly, gradually became lighter. The arms that held her slowly, gradually began to feel as though her weight was nonexistent.

Huh?

Alice then became aware of something strange. How could Shizuku have been weightless? Despite all that happened, such a thing was impossible. No matter how many organs she’d lost, her body was still full of flesh and bones.

That doubt shone a light on Alice’s darkened vision. She could again see her own two hands. There, Shizuku’s lifeless body had become nothing but a pile of clothes.

“Don’t worry, Alice.”

Shizuku’s voice suddenly, calmly carried through the underground training area.

“...Huh?!”

“Wh-What?!” Aghast, Alice and Wallenstein both looked all

around for Shizuku, but she was nowhere to be seen. Stranger yet, her organs and blood had at some point disappeared. “What the hell is happening?!”

With the situation now far beyond his understanding, Wallenstein yelled in a flurry. Between him and Alice, as if being created from vapor, Shizuku Kurogane appeared, in perfect health and total nudity. She opened her mouth and spoke to her friend.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I’m going to win.”

“Shizuku? You’re... alive?”

Alice looked as if she had seen a ghost. Her mind hadn’t caught up to the events, but as for Wallenstein, his battle-honed instincts made him aware of a phenomenon that could make what she’d done possible.

“It can’t be!” To test his terrifying theory, he once again swung his sword at Shizuku. She didn’t move to evade it, instead willingly taking the blow, allowing her body to again be severed in twain by his Device. But there was no spray of blood like there had been the first time. He felt no resistance against his sword, as if he were cutting through fog. Meanwhile, the image of Shizuku separated like it had before, then immediately returned to normal. “D-Damn you! You vaporized your own flesh?!”



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The truth had finally been made clear to Wallenstein. It was enough to make the image's lips curl into a grin. With a sadistic chuckle, Shizuku confirmed his suspicion. She told him the truth of how she had survived.

"Teehee. Well, sir, I see your mind hasn't dulled in your old age. Ever since I lost my selection battle against Raikiri, I got to thinking." Thinking that although she was clever, she lacked the power to seal her victory. Without that power, she would eventually be forced into a corner and suffer a fatal blow. What, then, was she to do? "I thought, and I thought some more. Then, suddenly, it came to me. 'That's it. I can only get hurt if I have flesh.'"

If that was the issue, then all she had to do was rectify it. Following that line of thinking, the technique she'd used was born. Thanks to her control of water, she could apply it to magic that healed the human body, culminating in a new Noble Art that could deconstruct her body down to vapor and dust, unaffected by slashes or strikes and able to reconstruct at will.

"Aoiro Rinne. Quite the stroke of genius, if I do say so myself," Shizuku said, clearly very proud of herself.

"A stroke of genius?! Do you even understand what you've done?!" Wallenstein turned pale as he looked upon her, but that was no surprise. Though Aoiro Rinne was temporary, it was still a technique that put one's own life in peril. "It doesn't matter how precise your magic control is, there's always the chance that you won't be able to reconstruct your body! Even if you can, if you make a single mistake with any one of your trillions of cells, there's no telling what could happen to you! Only an absolute madman would use an ability like that on themselves! Are you insane?!"

Indeed, it had its merits as a way to nullify physical attacks, but the amount of skill it required was impossibly high. There was too much risk to bear in using it. The mere idea that someone would attempt such a thing flabbergasted Wallenstein.

"I'm perfectly sane. I just knew that I could do it."

"Ngh...!"

Shizuku's nonchalant response despite all the dangers she faced had finally convinced Wallenstein of his blunder. He had gathered info on Hagun's students ahead of time, but based on his assessment, the only knight worth being wary of was Stella Vermillion. Though in a different way than Stella, Lorelei too was a genius, far beyond the realm of normalcy.

What a terrible mistake. But that doesn't mean I'll lose—

Wallenstein readied himself to resume their battle, but Shizuku giggled boisterously, as if making fun of him.

"Hmm? You still think you can fight me?"

“What are you—?! Gah... Aaagh...?!”

The instant Wallenstein regained his composure after the impact of seeing Aoiro Rinne, he realized that something was different within him. The air he coughed up would not be replaced, for his lungs refused to take in anything more. It was almost as if he was drowning—because he was.

“So this is what happens to someone when you fill their lungs like water balloons, is it? This is the first time I’ve ever seen it happen; my classmates are worth keeping alive, so I’d never use this technique on them.” As Shizuku was still under the effects of Aoiro Rinne, she was almost as one with the atmosphere of this underground room. Therefore, it was all under her control, including the very air that Wallenstein breathed. “Not much your precious friction can do inside your body, is there?”

“Gnah... Blrgh...!”

Indeed, Wallenstein’s ability to control friction was unmatched when it came to impacts and slashes from around him, but attacks from inside him were different. He was drowning in an invisible ocean, his ability to even stand lost to him as he fell to the floor. Desperate for even a molecule of oxygen, his eyes opened wide and his mouth flapped open and shut. He looked like a fish out of water.

“Hm? What’s that? I can’t understand you.”

“Please...! Spare... Ack!”

“Ohhh. You wanted my help?” It was as close to surrender as Wallenstein would get. The moment he realized that he would no longer be able to fight, he had raised the proverbial white flag. “Well, you’re not getting it.”

Shizuku snapped, the pitiless smirk on her face growing wider as she did. Responding to her will, blood instantly erupted from every one of Wallenstein’s pores.

“Nnn... Gaaaaaaaah?!!”

His skin was forcefully torn from within as dozens of icicle spears shot out of him in all directions. That final attack was enough to slice the One-Armed Sword Master’s consciousness to ribbons. He fell for good, a mix of blood and water leaking from his mouth like drool.

“I’m not as kind as my brother, and I’m not as generous as Stella. When a man points his blade at me, I won’t be satisfied until he’s dead and gone. This is no one’s fault but your own.”

Shizuku cast a cold glare down at him, as if she were looking at utter filth. Then, she pulled his overcoat off of him, covering her naked form with it as she turned away from her fallen foe. She no longer had any interest in him; the battle between the One-Armed Sword Master and Lorelei was over.



“If I put my mind to it, I can do anything. I’m not as easily disregarded as you might think.” Shizuku reformed her skin and bones, opening and closing her fists to confirm the texture. At the very least, nothing seemed wrong to the touch. Her reconstruction was a success, though it didn’t come without its own problems. “But that took too much mental exertion. I don’t feel good.”

The staggering amount of magic that she commanded had her brain screaming for a rest. Pain throbbed within her skull, reminding her of her own inexperience, and to stop being so reckless. It would take some time for her to fully regain her composure.

“Shizuku? Are you really alive?” Alice asked with shock still visible on her face.

“Cut it out. I’m not some sort of ghost.” Shizuku frowned with a “Hmph”, but Shizuku’s actions were so miraculous that Alice’s question was the only natural response. “You know, I thought Aoiro Rinne was a good idea. But I’m going to have to remember this whole ‘lose all of my clothes’ part. I can’t let my poor brother see me being so shameless.”

But as she saw Shizuku being her usual self, relief washed over Alice, drowning out all other emotions. She fell onto her backside, crying tears of joy at her friend’s survival.

“...Haha. Yeah, you’re alive. Thank goodness. Really, thank goodness.”

“That’s what I should be saying, honestly.” Shizuku stuck out her bottom lip as she got closer and bent down, pulling Alice’s head into a gentle, affectionate embrace. “Here I thought you’d already been killed.”

“Sh-Shizuku?”

“Seriously. Don’t ever worry me like that again, Big Sis.”

Shizuku’s voice quivered ever so slightly as she rejoiced for Alice’s safety. That little quiver touched Alice somewhere deep in her heart. The emotions that had weighed on her mind before had returned with greater fervor. It brought to mind the horrified faces of her lost siblings as they cowered in fear at the sight of their blood-soaked friend. As she looked upon them, she realized that she could no longer remain there. A murderer like her didn’t belong.

At some point, Alice had convinced herself that Shizuku would look at her with the same terror and that, if nothing else, she would at least not want to be around her any longer. However, if Shizuku could call her “Big Sis” even after all that had happened, then maybe...

“Is it... really okay for me to stay with you and everyone else?”

“If I said I wanted you to, would you leave us anyway?”

Alice shook her head, still held in Shizuku's arms. Shizuku was wrong. It was the greatest reason of them all.

"Thank you, Shizuku..."

"So, does this make us even?" Shizuku asked, giggling lightly.

Alice was quick to gather the point of that question. As she recalled, the two had hugged much the same back when Shizuku had lost to Raikiri, albeit with their roles reversed.

"...Yeah. For sure."

That little shared memory made Alice happy enough to smile once more as she swore to herself that she would never again betray Shizuku. She would stay with Shizuku for as long as the girl wished, and she would protect the person the girl loved. After all, Alice had come to love those things as well, for they were people that could be proud of themselves, just as Alice had wished to be for so long.



While trying to sense nearby magic, Kuro no felt the activation of an ability so strange that it was beyond anything she had ever experienced. It seemed as though it was Shizuku's magic, expanding so subtly that it was undetectable. The moment it became perceptible as wide-area magic, it again focused into the size of a normal human.

Her actions seemed to defy normal logic. For what reason had that happened? Knowing Shizuku's ability, Kuro no could guess why.

"She deconstructed and reconstructed her own self? Honestly. What a crazy pair these two are," Kuro no muttered, exasperated, as she looked more finely into the details of what occurred underground.

What Shizuku had done was a miracle in and of itself; she had practically revived herself from beyond the grave. Furthermore, judging by the response to her magic, Shizuku's foe had already been silenced. Kuro no could say with relative certainty that things at Akatsuki Academy had been settled. That knowledge gave her a touch of relief as she looked to the western sky.

Things went well enough over here, but how are things on your end, Nene?



"Black Blade Yatagarasu!"

"Kusanagi!"

A magical blade wrapped in lightning blacker than the night sky clashed with a tornado-clad sword, knocking the two knights away from each other. As he slid on the gravelly mountain road, Ouma Kurogane clicked his tongue.

"Just as I thought," he bemoaned. "By the third blow, it's lost

power.”

Meanwhile, the Demon Princess was launched directly away from Ouma. Nene Saikyou used her time in midair to skillfully redirect her descent and land in front of the Hagure sisters, who had been cornered in the remote mountains.

“Ms. Saikyou!”

“Looks like I’m just in time.”

“Hic! We’re saved...”

“That’s right. Good job, you two. You’re gonna be fine. Now then...” Confirming that the still-unconscious Stella was safe, Saikyou enjoyed a moment’s relief. She then turned again toward the problem at hand—Akatsuki Academy—and called out to the only person among them whose face she knew. “How long has it been, little Ouma? Since elementary school? My, look how you’ve grown.”

“And look how you haven’t.”

“Nobody asked you, bucko. Anyway, spill the beans. What’s the point in you guys kicking up such a shitstorm? And no fibbing, m’kay?”

Saikyou opened one of the two steel fans that comprised her Device and hid her mouth as she posed her question. The answer came not from Ouma, however, but from Amane, who waited behind him. He spoke while wearing a unique smile that could almost be construed as innocent.

“How about, instead of wasting our time chatting, we negotiate you handing over those three?”

“Hah! ‘Negotiate’? Lemme give you a little advice, brat.” The atmosphere instantly seemed to tense up. “You suck at pretending to be an adult!”



“Augh!”

All of Akatsuki were suddenly assailed by an intense weight. It wasn't just Akatsuki, though; everything within a fifty-foot radius of Saikyou had sunk into the earth, forced down by some unseen weight. That weight was created by Saikyou's gravity-manipulating Noble Art, Jibakujin.

All of the Akatsuki students, under the effects of ten times the usual gravity, were forced down into the dirt. All except for Ouma, who still stood facing Saikyou menacingly without moving a muscle. He gradually pointed the tip of Ryuuzume at her, to which she responded by once again materializing Black Blade Yatararasu, a sword of vast, pure energy controlled by her steel fans. It was clear that their fighting spirits were ramping up, making conflict unavoidable.

“Whoa, hey, stop right there! Hang on a second, everyone! Let's make our retreat. We have no need for those three.”

Out of nowhere, Reisen Hiraga stepped in, dressed in his usual unfitting clothing. The moment he'd delivered Alice to Wallenstein, he'd moved to return to the other students. Having finally caught up with his comrades, the Pierrot immediately urged them all to retreat.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I'd say we've made enough of an impact that the little benefit we'd get from continuing is canceled out by the huge risk of fighting the Demon Princess. If she lets loose now, Ouma would probably be safe, but I seriously doubt the rest of us would make it out unscathed. Our sponsor wouldn't want us to be defeated before the tournament even began, after all. So come, let's withdraw.”

“...Hmph.” Ouma sheathed his blade, bored.

“And you, Demon Princess? Any problems with that?”

After a moment of silent contemplation, Saikyou hid her fans in the sleeves of her kimono. There were too many enemies. No matter what happened to her, she knew that the students she had in tow would not make it out safely. It was her duty as a teacher to protect her students, so she had no reason to object.

“You're lucky I decided to take this damn teaching gig, you stupid little shits.”

“We appreciate your understanding.”

It was then that the Eve of the Festival, a disturbance that had begun at Hagun Academy, met a quiet end. Reisen Hiraga and the other Akatsuki students paid no attention to Stella or the Hagure twins as they disappeared into the darkness. The mountain path was left silent, save for the sound of wind blowing through the trees. There, Saikyou ruminated on Hiraga's words as she looked to the sky with a grimace.

“‘Sponsor’, huh? These guys are gonna be one hell of a pain in the ass, Kuu.”



The news of Akatsuki Academy's attack on Hagun quickly circulated across the nation, along with video of Hagun Academy's main building as it burned. The Seven Stars Battle Festival's management committee was quick to take action against those who had committed the atrocity, beginning a deep investigation into who was responsible for it all while considering the option of stripping the students involved of their knight certifications. The people demanded they be subjected to strict punishment, captured, and confined. Of course, it was certain that they wouldn't appear at the Seven Stars.

However, with the appearance of a man who claimed to be the director of Akatsuki Academy, everything changed. The name of the middle-aged man who proclaimed himself director was Bakuga Tsukikage, the Prime Minister of Japan. He held the highest position in the nation, yet despite the investigation into him, he did not apologize, nor did he even seem sorry in the slightest. Unbelievably, the man offered an invigorating smile as he made the claim.

"Wonderful, isn't it? Were you all surprised? A Federation-affiliated school stood no chance against them. This is the strength of the National Akatsuki Academy, the school that will bear Japan's future as it takes the place of the seven dogs of the Federation!"

He went on to speak of that very future. In it, National Akatsuki Academy would dominate the Seven Stars Battle Festival, ending the Mage-Knight Federation's reign over Japanese Blazers and returning sovereignty over their education to Japan. His speech would mark a turn of events that nobody could have ever imagined.

Police and government alike took no action against the Akatsuki atrocity. Instead, the event was treated as if the attack on Hagun had been a false alarm, an accident that had occurred during mutually consented-to training. Normally, such a claim would have been laughable, but with the government doubling down on it, it was easy to convince the public that black was white.

Of course, Hagun Academy, the other six schools, and the Seven Stars' management committee were furious. They quickly moved to block Akatsuki students from entering the Festival. Much to their dismay, however, they could not enforce such attempts, for they had

received a direct command from the International Mage-Knight Federation: the Federation would not tolerate having the education of Japan's Blazers wrested from their control. Therefore, they would put an end to Akatsuki Academy at the Seven Stars and prove that the Federation's system of education was superior.

All had gone exactly as Hiraga had said it would. With the nation of Japan itself on the enemy's side and even the Federation Headquarters declaring them as such, the management committee and the seven schools had little recourse available to them. Their claims were thrown out, and Akatsuki Academy became known as the up-and-coming powerhouse that had nearly destroyed Hagun with the power of a mere seven students. Their goal of formally entering the Seven Stars Battle Festival as an eighth school had been achieved.



"I'm sorry."

Recounting the events after the attack on Hagun, Kurono apologized to Ikki and Shizuku Kurogane for her own powerlessness.

"There's no reason for you to apologize, Director," Ikki told her, requesting that she lift her head.

"Big Brother is right. But what a shock that our own country was behind it all."

"It's been a ticking time bomb ever since World War II," Kurono said in response to Shizuku.

The country's entry into the Federation was anything but a unanimous decision. Using the weariness that followed the war as a tailwind, the prime minister at the time went as far as giving up territory to cooperate with other nations and stop the runaway imperialism that had been occurring. It was part of a greater campaign to get Japan to enter the Federation.

"But that action meant parting with our status as a world power," Kurono continued. "There was backlash against it, of course, leading to a bloody internal political feud. Despite all that, the prime minister was adamant about international cooperation. The political discord still remains to this day. Many believe that Japan still has the strength to hold its own as a superpower—like the USA or Russia—without joining the Federation, many want to change the nation so that we can do that, and many believe that Japan's inability to educate or punish Blazers without permission from the Federation is a major problem. These factions exist in both our government and in the Federation's Japanese branch."

"Even in the Federation itself?"

"The Federation's Japanese branch as you know it is a remnant of the samurai of the past. Back when Blazers were still called

samurai, a group of them working under the Japanese government split off and changed their name. Present relations with the Federation's main branch, which snatched away their authority, are bad, to say the least. But, well, that's what happens when you force everyone to go along with the "international cooperation" option. Not to mention the Anti-Federation sentiment that exists among the general populace. The government is what it is today as a result of it spending half a century expanding its power while under the pressure of public opinion. I guess it was more or less unavoidable that something like this would happen at some point."

Putting extremists aside, it wasn't all too surprising that many would take issue with their nation's army being made up of people trained by another entity's educational system. Even so, joining the Federation came with its own multitude of benefits, so it was hard to say for sure which side was correct.

"So, in short, Prime Minister Tsukikage's plan is to use the Seven Stars—the Federation's stage for putting the results of their training on display—to refute their methods by showing off his own students' strength and take back our right to educate Blazers from the Federation?"

"Well, that would be the best outcome. The worst-case scenario is that he might be trying to completely sever ties with the Federation."

"Does nobody care that he's using human resources provided by the Rebellion, a group of actual terrorists?"

"The only evidence that Akatsuki's students are members of Rebellion comes from Alisuin's testimony. If they play innocent, there's nothing we can do. Even if we had irrefutable evidence, the government would probably just suppress it by force, just like what they did with the attack on Hagun." Kuro no sighed, then put a cigarette to her lips with a bitter groan. "But I still can't believe Director Tsukikage would do something like this."

"Director? Do you know the Prime Minister personally?"

"He was the director of Hagun Academy back when I was a student. I remember him as an intellectual, rational man. What the hell did the government do to him?" she pondered as she lit her cigarette. Upon closer inspection, the ashtray on Kuro no's desk had been stabbed with so many cigarette butts that it looked like a sea urchin. She was clearly stressed. "Anyway, Akatsuki Academy's spot at the Seven Stars is all but secured. They're all elites with ties to crime syndicates, so it wouldn't be wrong to assume that this year's Festival will be a hell of a lot different from last year's. As a result, we instructors believe we should ask you representatives once more: are you absolutely willing to go up against people like that? That's the

reason I had you come here today.”

“It is?” Ikki asked, the reason he had been summoned to Kuro no’s office finally revealed to him.

“Alisuin, Toutokubara, and the Hagure twins have all given up their spots. Looks like Alisuin feels responsible for what happened, while Toutokubara wanted to stay with Toudou, since she’s yet to wake up. Kikyuu and Botan Hagure seem to have merely folded before the power of the Akatsuki.”

“I... see. I guess that’s not too surprising.”

“And you? What are you going to do? Circumstances as they are, our deal can wait—”

“No,” Ikki declared, cutting her off. “I have no issue with continuing. I’m going to the Seven Stars. Our promise won’t change.”

He didn’t need the compromise she was trying to offer. He had long since made up his mind.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. After all, I don’t see this year’s Festival being that much different from last year’s. All that’s changed is that knights from criminal organizations have joined what used to be a more exclusive event.” Ikki’s voice was strong, with clear resolve backing it up. “If the Festival exists to find out who’s the strongest student knight in Japan, then really, this is the Festival in its truest form, and that’s perfect for me. We student knights don’t have the slightest idea what the prime minister is thinking. All I can do is to fight fair and square until I meet with Stella at the top. Besides, there’s someone I’m interested in there.”

“The Gale Sword Emperor?”

“No,” Ikki answered quickly. “Not that I’m not interested in Ouma, but this is different.”

“Who’s got you more interested than the Gale Sword Emperor?”

“It’s a student from Kyomon’s roster, Amane Shinomiya.”

“Was that the boy with the adorable face, Big Brother?”

Ikki answered Shizuku’s question with a nod. That piqued Kuro no’s curiosity, causing her to raise an eyebrow.

“He didn’t seem especially interesting to me,” she said.

“I’d agree with that,” Ikki replied, confusing Kuro no all the more.

“Hmm?”

“He doesn’t have the incredible drive that Ouma does. Even among the Akatsuki students, that boy didn’t seem to leave much of an impression. And I think we’re both right to think that way; he probably isn’t a very strong knight compared to the rest of Akatsuki Academy. But still, I just can’t get him out of my head for some reason, and I always feel this surprisingly intense aversion toward him. I don’t know why I feel so repulsed by him, but I want to find

out.”

Ikki's inability to explain why he felt so put off by Amane in particular made him all the more uncomfortable about it. Even if he didn't know the reason, though, there must have been one. Seeming to accept that answer, Kurono nodded.

“Well, Kurogane, you never struck me as the type to hate others for no reason. Maybe there's something about that Shinomiya boy that only you have figured out so far. Anyway, I understand your commitment. I'll take care of the details of your participation.”

“Thank you.” Ikki expressed his gratitude, then asked about something that he had been wondering about. “Um, Director? Is Stella going to be there too?”

“I asked her this morning,” Kurono replied with a small chuckle. “She didn't hesitate for a second when she said yes. ‘You think I'd give up that easily after they made a fool out of me?!’”

“Big Brother, that does sound like Stella.”

“It sure does,” Ikki said and nodded slightly.

“Oh. That reminds me, Kurogane. I have a message from her. She told me to tell you, ‘I won't be coming back to the dorm this week even though it's the week before the Seven Stars, but that doesn't mean you can let Shizuku stay over.’”

“Ignore that message,” Shizuku answered immediately before turning to Ikki. “But still, I wonder why she isn't coming back this week.”

“...Yeah. I'm sure Stella has a lot on her mind.”

Ikki was reminded of what Stella had said when the two had visited the still-unconscious Touka and Utakata the day before. As she stared teary-eyed at the two sleeping council members, she spoke shakily, clenching her fists so tightly that they nearly started to bleed. “*I never knew that weakness felt so bitter*,” she'd said. She probably wouldn't have wanted others to know what she'd said or that she'd cried, so Ikki left Shizuku with a vague answer.

“In any case, I've got an important question for you, Shizuku Kurogane.”

Kurono turned her attention toward Shizuku, who had been sitting silently next to Ikki for most of the meeting.

“Yes, ma'am?”

“As you've heard, four of our representatives have given up their spots at the Seven Stars. As it so happens, one of them requested to transfer their status to you. In all of the mess that we faced, you were the sole knight to seize victory in the fights against Akatsuki. In terms of strength, you're not lacking in any sense of the word. If you consent to this transfer, I could arrange for your entry. What do you think?”

There was no surprise on Shizuku's face. Alice must have

mentioned it to her beforehand. Showing no real signs of uncertainty, Shizuku answered with a nod.

“Of course. I’d be happy to join.”

“Then I’ll make the arrangements,” Kurono said, jotting something down on a document on her desk and stamping her seal. She then looked up and spoke to the two students standing before her with a fearless grin on her face. “This year’s had some crazy developments right off the bat, none of which we could’ve imagined last year. But as you’ve explained, Ikki Kurogane, you have no need to fear the ploys of certain men. The stars of the Seven Stars are, as ever, you student knights. This will be a good opportunity for you to trade blows with Rebellion troops, too, as they’re an enemy you’d rarely get to fight otherwise. Maybe a Seven Stars that includes *every* kind of student knight in Japan won’t be too bad after all. It’ll be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for you to stand on a stage where you can test the limits of your strength to your hearts’ content!”

“Yes, ma’am!” the Kurogane siblings declared in unison.



While Ikki and Shizuku were meeting with Kurono, Stella Vermillion stood in front of the KoK league’s specialized gym within the Tokyo Metropolitan Area. She was waiting for a certain person.

“Well, well. Fancy meeting you here.”

The person who greeted her was Nene Saikyou, the Demon Princess. The facility they were at was one that she used regularly during her stay at Hagun.

“I’ve been waiting for you, Ms. Nene.”

“Oh? Does that mean you want something from me, Princess?”

With that guess, Saikyou urged Stella to state her business.

Wearing an expression that was either earnestness or nervousness, she gave her reply.

“I’d like you to help me train for the Seven Stars this week.”

“Well, this is a sudden request. What for?”

Stella bit her lip when she heard the question, then strained to answer it.

“Ever since I failed to surpass Touka, I’ve had a vague feeling about something. But what happened at Hagun really drove it home for me.” Stella’s hands still throbbed from having been pushed back by Ouma’s Kusanagi. It was the first time she’d ever lost in her domain, a battle of raw strength. The shock of that failure, combined with Touka’s continuing unconsciousness as a result of protecting Stella, thrust one undeniable truth upon her. “...I’m weak. If I don’t get stronger, I’ll never be able to meet Ikki at the top.”

“So that’s what makes you want my help?”

Stella nodded vigorously.

“As far as I can see, you’re the strongest person in the whole school! So, Ms. Nene, I want you to train me in the week I have left! Please!”

“...And if I say no?”

Stella had lowered her head deeply, but when asked that question, she looked back up at Saikyou.

“When showered with sparks, anyone would be forced to brush them away. Know what I mean?”

There was a glimmer in Stella’s eye, showing through her drooping bangs as she stared at Saikyou. If she would not help her willingly, Stella would force her to. If she were to refuse, Stella would not hesitate to attack. Realizing that that was what her stare implied, Saikyou sighed internally.

Well, she’s got me there.

She had noticed that Stella was desperate. An overwhelming loss the likes of which she had never experienced before and a sense of powerlessness the likes of which she had never felt before had put her in an incredibly difficult position; she was struggling desperately to confront the desire to do anything she could while not knowing where to begin. In asking for Saikyou’s help, she was likely attempting to do that which was most difficult for her. It was the only option she had, because if she did nothing, she would be crushed by the discomfort.

The first thing Stella needed to do, though, was to calm down. Forced training spurred on by impatience was more than just dangerous. Frankly, there was little to nothing that Saikyou could actually teach her. The untapped potential within her was something she was simply unable to match. If a commoner were to teach her bad habits, Stella, the genius with the most magic power in the world, would have her potential limited. In order to prevent that, in order to avoid creating the worst possible deficit, trying to calm her down was the best decision for a teacher to make.

But man, I actually feel bad for her.

Looking at how stressed Stella was—nearly to the point of crying—Saikyou began to think. Indeed, calming her down may have been the best decision for the long term. Stella’s potential was a cut above the rest; by the time she graduated from Hagun, even the Gale Sword Emperor wouldn’t stand a chance against her. Saikyou could easily imagine that future for her.

But that was three whole years down the road, and the impatience that Stella felt was not without reason. If she didn’t get stronger before the Seven Stars, reaching the finals would prove difficult, if not outright impossible. She knew as much, hence she was so desperate.

You're just a late bloomer, clearly... Pfft. No way someone her age would listen to bullshit like that.

Saikyou grinned wryly, remembering her own days as a student. When she was young, she had constantly pushed others to help her get stronger and show results. The time she forfeited her match with Kurono and nearly killed her was a prime example of that. Back then, all she'd cared about was the present; the future hadn't mattered to her one bit. She had been willing to die if it meant victory.

Stella was young, and people her age had their own sets of values. Those values may have been irrational and unworldly, but trying to force children to think logically when they normally only saw things their way was nothing if not illogical. To that end, Saikyou made a proposal.

"All right, Stella. I've got one condition. If you accept it, I might spare some time for you."

"R-Really?! What is it?!"

"Simple. I'll join you in your training, but I won't teach you anything."

"Huh?"

"Basically, this coming week will be a twenty-four seven beatdown, starring me. I might destroy your body, or, who knows, maybe your mind will break first. And I'm just gonna keep on going, no mercy. If you're okay with that kind of training, then let's do it."

"So you're saying I should figure it out on my own as we go?"

"Yep. But I can't guarantee you'll be able to. So, whaddaya say?"

That was the best idea Saikyou could come up with: just show Stella what true strength looked like, make her realize how powerless she truly was. It was up to her to find a solution. If she couldn't, then, well, too bad.

As poor a proposal it was to come from a teacher, of all people, it was more than enough to lure her in. She was desperate; all she really wanted was some sense of direction, an opportunity to take the next step toward greater strength. If there was a chance that she could find it, she had no reason to refuse.

"That's perfect! Thank you so much!"

"Come with me, then. Get ready for a week of hell on earth."



Everyone involved with the Seven Stars passed the final week before the event in their own way. Good and evil, adult and child alike, all were enveloped in a tempest of hopes and ambitions as they barreled toward the Seven Stars.

Two days prior to the Festival, the bracket was announced. With the abstaining parties removed from the bracket, only thirty-two

contestants remained. One such contestant, Ikki Kurogane, smirked as he looked over the matchups. Perhaps he was confident, or perhaps his smirk betrayed something more bitter, as from among the other thirty-one participants, Ikki was tasked with fighting a third-year from Bukyoku Academy in the first round. His first opponent was to be the winner of the previous year's Festival and the man who stood indisputably at the top of Japan's student knight population: the Seven Stars King, Yuudai Moroboshi.

Afterword

Thank you for reading volume four of *Chivalry of a Failed Knight*. I'm the author, Riku Misora. Were you excited for this volume? Poor Ikki went through so much!

- His brother is apparently working for some suspicious organization.

- He had a sudden encounter with the final boss.

- He got a new fan that's very reminiscent of Robert De Niro's *The Fan*.

- He'll be fighting last year's champion in his first match.

Put it all together, and he's got some awful luck. It's like the stars aligned against him. Then again, maybe that isn't too our of the ordinary. That's a Rank F's luck for you.

So, in the fifth volume, I'm planning for the main event to be Ikki's clash with last year's Seven Stars King, the very Yuudai Moroboshi that shut out even Raikiri. I've got it in my head as a nice, juicy climax, and I'll be spinning the gears in my mind to write the rest from there. I hope you're all excited for it!

Now, as you might have seen on the book wrapper, *Chivalry of a Failed Knight* has begun manga serialization! Having my work made into a manga was one of my biggest goals, so I'm over the moon about this. I wasn't able to achieve my dream with *Danzai no Exceed* or *Kanojo no Koi ga Hanashitekurenai!*, but it finally happened! Remember, it's all thanks to you readers that this is possible! Thank you so much!

By the time you all see this afterword, volume one should be published in manga form on *Gangan Online*. Because it was through your support that this happened, I invite you all to enjoy it as well. I'm so happy I could cry!

Last but not least, I must offer my usual heartfelt thanks to the editorial staff who helped with revisions, along with Won, who did all of these new character designs for the plunge into this new volume. I was beyond thrilled when he sent me Amame's and Sara Bloodlily's designs; they were just what I'd imagined!

To all of you who continue to support me through the fourth volume of this work, I once again offer my deepest gratitude. I would be fortunate if you all continued to join me on this journey to the end of the Seven Stars Battle Festival arc. Let's meet again in volume five!

1. Prologue: City in a Snowy Land
2. Chapter 1: Training Camp
3. Chapter 2: Mischief in the Shadows
4. Chapter 3: Akatsuki Takes the Stage
5. Chapter 4: A Too-Early Finale
6. Epilogue: The Fixer
7. Afterword

1. Cover